A-thematic possessor raising
 keywords: possessor raising, affectedness, object shift

Some natural languages allow a possessor phrase semantically associated with an argument to behave syntactically as a clausal dependent. This talk focuses on an instance of this phenomenon in Nez Perce (Penutian). In Nez Perce sentences like (1), the object possessor phrase (in bold) behaves by various tests as a dependent of the clause, rather than of the possessum DP: it controls verbal object agreement; it may mark objective case; it may be expressed as a clitic pronoun; it may be linearly separated from the possessum DP.

(1) hi-nees-hex-ne’ny-e ma-may’as-na pist
    3SUBJ-O.PL-see-PR-T/A/M PL-child-OBJ father
He saw the children’s father.

For (1) and its crosslinguistic analogues, movement or possessor raising (PR) analyses offer a way to reconcile the possessor DP’s syntactic behavior as a clausal dependent with its semantic behavior as an argument of the possessum DP (Landau 1999, Lee-Schoenfeld 2006).

I argue for an analysis of object PR in Nez Perce as involving short, obligatory, a-thematic movement within vP – a constellation of factors otherwise known as (low) object shift. As a result of movement, the raised possessor DP is second highest in vP. In this position, objects enter into an Agree relationship with v, resulting in object agreement and objective case (Deal 2010).

Evidence for the movement analysis comes from relative locality effects. In Nez Perce ditransitives, goal DPs are higher than theme DPs, as shown by condition C effects (as in English, Barss and Lasnik 1986):

(2) Weet ‘e-tkuytuu’-ye proi/*j [Angel-nimj poxpok’ala]
    Y.N 3OBJ-throw-T/A/M [Angel-GEN ball]
Did you throw him/her/*j Angel’s/*j ball?

Possessor raising is only possible from the goal of a ditransitive, not the theme.

(3) ’aayat-om hi-kiwyek-ey’-se ’iin-e picpic cuu’yem.
    woman-ERG 3SUBJ-feed-PR-T/A/M 1SG-OBJ cat fish
a. The woman feeds my cat the fish.

$$[X_P \ 'iine [X [VP [t \ pic \ \_goal [V \ cuu'yem_{theme} ]]]]]$$

b. * The woman feeds the cat my fish.

$$[X_P \ 'iine [X [VP picpic_{goal} [V [t \ cuu'yem]\_theme ]]]]$$

This pattern can be explained in terms of locality constraints on A-movement. The lower (theme) DP’s possessor cannot shift over the higher (goal) DP (3b); only the higher DP’s possessor is relatively local to X (3a).

What is the nature of the head X to which possessors raise in Nez Perce? Lee-Schoenfeld (2006) provides an analysis of possessor dative constructions in German, as in (4), according to which the head driving movement in a configuration like (2) is a $\theta$-role-assigning light verb.

(4) Tim hat der Nachbarin das Auto gewaschen.
Tim has the neighbor.DAT.FEM the car washed
Tim washed the neighbor’s car. (Lee-Schoenfeld 2006)

PR in German thus falls under the rubric of raising to $\theta$-positions (Hornstein 1999). This analysis responds to well-known facts related to the "affectedness condition" on PR in German, and indeed in European languages more generally (Haspelmath 1999). In this respect, the Nez Perce facts are strikingly different from those of European languages. PR in Nez Perce does not carry thematic consequences; in particular, Nez Perce belongs to a class of languages in which object PR does not enforce any condition of possessor affectedness (compare Aissen 1987 on Tzotzil). Following up on Rude (1985)’s report that object PR is obligatory in Nez Perce, I show that PR is required even when the possessor is inanimate, deceased, or otherwise unaffected.

The existence of a-thematic possessor raising, along with the better-known thematic type, suggests a typology of PR constructions centered on the content of the head driving A-movement (X). Languages like German and Nez Perce differ in a simple way: in thematic PR (German), X is a role-assigning head, whereas in a-thematic PR (Nez Perce), X is an object shift head with no thematic content. Given its absence of thematic content and its position just below vP, the X head in Nez Perce PR plausibly instantiates Johnson 1991’s low object shift head $\mu$, or the Linker category proposed by Baker and Collins 2006. PR constructions in Nez Perce require special verbal morphology (e’n and allomorphs). If this special morphology can be taken to instantiate $\mu$/Linker, as seems plausible, the Nez Perce PR phenomenon provides both morphological and syntactic evidence of low object shift heads of this type.

Word count: 724