



The Description of Possessive Phrase Structure in Malay from a Morphosyntactic and Pragmatic Perspective

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Abstract. This study examines the structure and interpretation of possessive noun phrases in Malay from both morphosyntactic and pragmatic perspectives. It focuses on three principal possessive constructions: the N + N construction (e.g., *rumah saya* [my house], *basikal saya* [my bicycle]), the clitic-*nya* construction (e.g., *basikalnya* [his/her bicycle], *rumahnya* [his/her house]) and the lexical possessive marker *punya* (own). The analysis is based on corpus data extracted from the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) corpus database, providing empirical evidence of naturally occurring possessive usage in Malay discourse. A total of 338 concordances of *basikalnya* and 100 concordances of *rumahnya* were generated from texts across all genres and decades. For the N + N possessive pattern, 259 relevant concordances were identified from the first 2,000 corpus hits of the structure exemplified by *rumah saya*, as documented in *Tatabahasa Dewan*. In addition, data on the lexical marker *punya* were extracted, yielding 14,393 concordances from the DBP corpus, reflecting its widespread use in possessive constructions. Methodologically, the study employs a morphological-syntactic analysis grounded in transformational generative grammar, drawing on the Minimalist Program to account for the internal composition and syntactic derivation of possessive noun phrases. While this structural analysis captures the formal properties of possession, it does not fully explain how Malay speakers interpret possessive meaning in constructions lacking overt genitive morphology. To address this, the study incorporates Relevance Theory as a pragmatic analytical framework, highlighting the role of inferential processes, contextual assumptions and cognitive optimisation in meaning interpretation. The findings show that Malay speakers systematically recover possessive meaning through pragmatic inference, relying on contextual cues and shared knowledge even in the absence of explicit morphological marking. This

study contributes to the understanding of Malay morphosyntax and pragmatics by elucidating how possession is structurally represented and cognitively inferred in a language without overt genitive marking.

Keywords and phrases: cognitive processing, Malay language, morphosyntactic, possessive, noun phrases

Introduction

Possession is a fundamental grammatical and cognitive concept that varies significantly across languages regarding morphosyntactic encoding and pragmatic interpretation. In many Indo-European languages, possessive noun phrases are explicitly marked through possessive determiners, pronouns, or inflectional morphology (Alexiadou 2003; Coene and D'hulst 2003). Malay, as an Austronesian language, differs from this pattern by employing a syntactic strategy where possession is primarily inferred through juxtaposition rather than morphological marking. Unlike English where possessive determiners (e.g., his house) explicitly indicate possession, Malay structures such as *rumah saya* (my house) and *basikalnya* (his/her bicycle) convey possessive meaning through discourse-based interpretation rather than fixed syntactic rules. This raises key questions about the linguistic and cognitive mechanisms involved in processing possessive relationships in Malay.

Linguistic research on possession has been well-established in Indo-European and East Asian languages (Espan̄l-Echevarr̄a 1997; Guéron 1984; Ke 2023; Niu 2015). Studies in Spanish (Espan̄l-Echevarr̄a 1997) distinguish between alienable and inalienable possession, illustrating that inalienable possession (e.g., kinship and body parts) is grammatically encoded differently from alienable possession (e.g., owned objects). Similarly, research on Mandarin (Ke 2023) indicates that speakers rely heavily on contextual inference for possessive interpretation, particularly in constructions where *de* (of) is omitted. Theoretical perspectives from these languages suggest that possessive meaning can be conveyed implicitly, raising broader typological questions about the role of pragmatics in possessive constructions across languages, including Malay.

Despite extensive research on possessive structures in languages with overt marking, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of pragmatic inference in Malay possessive noun phrases. Prior research on Malay syntax (Nik Safiah et al. 2015; Asmah 2015) categorises possessive noun phrases under noun phrase structures, emphasising the head-modifier relationship but providing no explanation on how possession is inferred without explicit markers. Radiah (2014) identifies pronominal enclitics such as *-nya* as possessive markers

in specific syntactic environments; however, her study does not address broader instances where possessive meaning emerges without these markers, particularly in spoken discourse.

A key challenge in analysing Malay possessive noun phrases is explaining why native speakers intuitively interpret possession in structures that lack overt possessive marking. This phenomenon is particularly evident in both formal and informal registers of Malay, where possessive relationships are inferred without explicit morphosyntactic indicators. For example, corpus analysis reveals that *punya* (own) historically served as an intermediary possessive marker (*Saya punya rumah* [My house]), but its omission in contemporary usage does not hinder possessive interpretation (*rumah saya*). This suggests that Malay speakers process possession through discourse-based cues and cognitive principles of minimal effort, rather than relying solely on syntactic markers.

To address this issue, linguistic theories on pragmatic inference, particularly Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995), provide a potential explanatory framework. This theory suggests that human cognition is geared toward seeking relevance, meaning that speakers aim to convey the most meaningful information with the least cognitive effort. In the case of Malay possessive noun phrases, the absence of explicit possessive markers may be compensated by contextual cues and shared background knowledge, allowing speakers to infer possessive meaning without requiring additional grammatical encoding. Studies on Mandarin and other East Asian languages (Lin 2003; Ke 2023) suggest that similar cognitive mechanisms enable possession to be inferred pragmatically, reinforcing the applicability of pragmatic inference theories in understanding Malay possessive structures.

Existing literature offers several insights into the morphosyntactic properties of Malay possessive noun phrases. Nik Safiah et al. (2015) classify Malay noun phrases into head-modifier structures, while Radiah (2014) explores the role of enclitics such as *-nya* in marking possession. However, these studies primarily examine formal written structures, leaving gaps in understanding how possession is interpreted in spontaneous spoken interactions. Comparative studies in Mandarin (Ke 2023; Niu 2015) and Spanish (Espan̄ol-Echevarr̄ia 1997) highlight how possessive meaning can be inferred pragmatically, suggesting that Malay possessive noun phrases exhibit a similar reliance on discourse-based interpretation rather than explicit morphosyntactic encoding. Despite these insights, the lack of an integrated framework that connects morphosyntactic analysis with cognitive-pragmatic principles leaves theoretical gaps that require further investigation.

The present study aims to address these gaps by adopting a morphosyntactic and pragmatic approach to analysing Malay possessive noun phrases. Specifically, it investigates how possessiveness is inferred without explicit grammatical markers, drawing on corpus data and theoretical insights from linguistic typology and cognitive pragmatics. By applying Relevance Theory, this study proposes that Malay speakers rely on minimal linguistic input while achieving optimal communicative efficiency. The findings will contribute to linguistic typology by demonstrating how possession can be pragmatically encoded without morphological inflection, distinguishing Malay from languages that employ genitive case marking or possessive determiners.

The novelty of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach, integrating morphosyntactic analysis with pragmatic interpretation to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Malay possessive structures. While prior research has described possessive constructions in formal terms, this study offers an explanatory framework that accounts for both structural configurations and cognitive processing mechanisms. Furthermore, this research contributes to broader discussions on how languages encode possession and the role of pragmatic inference in linguistic interpretation by situating Malay within a cross-linguistic perspective. This study focuses on possessive noun phrases in contemporary Malay, emphasising syntactic structures and pragmatic inference. It does not examine broader semantic or sociolinguistic aspects of possession.

Methodology

This study adopts a linguistic analytical approach based on corpus data which serves as evidence that these possessive phrases are used by native speakers in spoken and written language. The study integrates two main frameworks, namely morphosyntactic analysis and pragmatic analysis to investigate the structure and interpretation of possessive noun phrases in Malay. The data were obtained from all types of texts available from the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) corpus database. Data selection was guided by two main criteria: (1) possessive constructions involving the use of the clitic *-nya* (e.g., *basikalnya* [his/her bicycle], *rumahnya* [his/her house]) and (2) possessive phrases that appear in the form of N + N constructions (e.g., *rumah saya* [my house]). In addition, the word *punya* was also generated from the DBP corpus database to show that there is a construction of possessive phrases used in the spoken form of the Malay language (e.g., *saya punya buku* [my book]) with the word *punya* which clearly supports the meaning of possession. Further explanation on data selection will be given in data selection subtopic in the next section.

The study also incorporates cross-linguistic comparisons with possessive structures in other languages, including English, Spanish, Japanese, Mandarin and Turkish. These comparisons provide a broader typological framework to analyse how different languages encode possession and how Malay differs in its morphosyntactic and pragmatic strategies (Sperber and Wilson 1995).

Morphosyntactic approach

At the morphosyntactic level, the existence of both possessive noun phrase structures is analysed through the lens of Transformational Generative Theory, specifically within the Minimalist Program, which emphasises the role of functional heads and the hierarchical structure of nominal phrases (Chomsky 1995; Abney 1987). Within this framework, the clitic *-nya* is analysed as the morphological realisation of a functional head that introduces possessive features into the nominal structure. This approach is consistent with studies on possession in agglutinative languages, which treat possessive markers as obligatory structural elements rather than optional modifiers (Bartos 1999; Dékány 2015).

The analysis also considered differences in meaning arising from the presence or absence of *-nya* within a sentence. The following structure is used to guide the analysis:

1. Possessive construction = Head noun + *-nya*
Example: *bukunya* (his/her book)
2. Possessive construction = Head noun + Modifier noun
Example: *buku saya* (my book)
3. Possessive construction = Head noun + *punya* + Noun
Example: *Ali punya buku* (Ali's book)

The analysis also distinguishes between two possessive constructions in Malay, namely morphologically marked possession (N + *-nya*) and unmarked nominal possession (N + N, e.g., *rumah saya*). While the former encodes possession explicitly at the morphosyntactic level, the latter relies on pragmatic inference for the recovery of possessive meaning.

Although morphosyntactic analysis is essential for describing the structural configuration of possessive constructions and the grammatical relations between possessor and possessed elements, this approach is subject to several theoretical limitations. A key issue concerns the absence of a theta role that

directly encodes possessive relations (Bernstein 2006; Bernstein and Tortora 2005). In many languages, including English, possessive structures such as “Mary’s store” do not involve the assignment of a semantic role from the noun “store to Mary”, indicating that the relationship is primarily grammatical rather than semantically specified. Similarly, expressions such as “Chomsky’s book” are ambiguous between an ownership interpretation and an authorship interpretation, demonstrating that possessive meaning is not fully determined by morphosyntactic structure alone (Bernstein 2006).

A comparable situation is observed in Malay, which permits a variety of possessive constructions without explicit morphological marking. For example, the phrase *rumah Ali* (Ali’s house) may be interpreted as denoting ownership, temporary residence, or an institutional association, depending on the discourse context. While morphosyntactic analysis can account for constituent order and hierarchical relations within noun phrases, it is insufficient to explain how possessive interpretations are recovered in actual language use, particularly in constructions that lack overt possessive markers such as the clitic *-nya*.

At the syntactic level, the study employed the framework of Generative Transformational Grammar, the Minimalist approach to account for the positioning of possessive elements in sentence structure. Tree diagrams were utilised to demonstrate distinctions between deep structure and surface structure, thereby clarifying the generative mechanisms of possessive phrases. Cross-linguistic comparison was also conducted with reference to English (Ali’s book), Spanish (*el libro de Ali*), Japanese (*Ali no hon*), Mandarin (*Ali de shū*) and Turkish (*Ali’nin kitabı*) in order to highlight similarities and differences in possessive constructions between Malay and these languages.

The emergence of the Minimalist Framework marked a fundamental reconceptualisation of grammatical relations, shifting the focus from rule-based case assignment to feature checking driven by interface conditions. Although Chomsky (1995) does not explicitly address possessive case, the core assumptions of the Minimalist Program particularly the role of functional categories, feature checking and economy provide a principled theoretical basis for analysing possessive constructions. Within this framework, possessive case is no longer viewed as inherently assigned by a nominal head but as a formal feature that must be checked, typically through a spec-head relation involving the determiner phrase. This reconceptualisation allows possessive case to be integrated into the overall framework of Minimalist syntax without requiring a dedicated case-assigning mechanism.

While morphological and syntactic analyses are able to describe the structural form and generative mechanism of possessive phrases, such analyses alone are insufficient to explain how these constructions are actually interpreted in real communicative contexts. This is because possessive phrases in Malay often do not explicitly mark possession through morphological forms, unlike many other languages that employ overt possessive markers. If the analysis were to stop at the structural level, it would merely reveal the positional arrangement of elements in a sentence without addressing how speakers and hearers interpret ownership in actual discourse. Therefore, a pragmatic approach is necessary, as it enables the analysis to explore the role of context, inference and shared knowledge employed by hearers to recover implicit possessive meaning.

Pragmatics approach

From a pragmatic perspective, this study adopts Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995) as an inferential framework to account for the interpretation of possessive noun phrases in Malay, particularly in cases where possession is not overtly encoded through dedicated morphological markers. Relevance Theory is grounded in two foundational principles: the Cognitive Principle of Relevance, which posits that human cognition is inherently oriented toward the maximisation of relevance and the Communicative Principle of Relevance, which holds that every ostensive act of communication carries a presumption of optimal relevance. Together, these principles predict that speakers select linguistic forms that are expected to yield adequate contextual effects for the hearer, while hearers interpret utterances by following a path of least processing effort and stopping at the first interpretation that satisfies their expectations of relevance.

Within this framework, possessive interpretations in Malay are treated as the result of pragmatic inference rather than solely of semantic encoding. For morphologically marked possessive constructions such as N + *-nya*, the clitic *-nya* provides a strong procedural cue that constrains the inferential process by directing the hearer toward a possessive interpretation. The presence of *-nya* thus reduces interpretive effort by narrowing the range of plausible relations between the possessor and the possessed entity, allowing the possessive meaning to be recovered rapidly and with minimal contextual enrichment. In relevance-theoretic terms, possession in such constructions forms part of the utterance's explicature, that is, an explicitly communicated meaning that is pragmatically enriched from the linguistically encoded form.

By contrast, in unmarked possessive constructions of the type N + N (e.g., *rumah saya* [my house]), no overt morphological instruction for possession is available. In these cases, Relevance Theory explains how hearers nevertheless arrive at a possessive interpretation by integrating the decoded linguistic form with highly accessible contextual assumptions, such as culturally entrenched associations between entities (e.g., houses and ownership), discourse salience and world knowledge. Among the range of possible relations between the two nouns, possession emerges as the most relevant interpretation because it yields sufficient cognitive effects such as identifying ownership or responsibility, while requiring the least processing effort. Alternative interpretations (e.g., temporary residence or spatial association) are cognitively more costly, as they require additional contextual assumptions and are therefore disfavoured unless explicitly supported by the discourse context.

Crucially, Relevance Theory allows this study to model possession in Malay as a continuum of explicitness, ranging from morphologically encoded possession (N + *-nya*) to pragmatically inferred possession (N + N). While these constructions differ in their degree of formal marking, both are interpreted through the same relevance-driven inferential mechanism. The framework thus provides a principled explanation for how Malay speakers systematically recover possessive meaning even in the absence of overt genitive morphology, demonstrating that pragmatic enrichment plays a central role in the interpretation of possessive noun phrases.

The analysis therefore examines possessive constructions along three interrelated parameters: (1) morphological structure, which considers the role of the clitic *-nya* and the presence or absence of explicit possessive marking, (2) syntactic complexity, which investigates hierarchical relationships between possessor and possessed nouns, often represented through tree diagrams and (3) pragmatic interpretation, which highlights the role of discourse context, speaker intention and inferential enrichment in deriving possessive meaning. In addition, the study also considers the use of *punya* in spoken and historical texts as a strategy to reinforce possession and traces historical developments in possessive structures through corpus analysis. Taken together, this cognitive-pragmatic perspective underscores that the interpretation of Malay possessive phrases goes beyond structural analysis: it is a dynamic inferential process where pragmatic enrichment, guided by the principle of relevance, enables successful communication across diverse registers, including formal, literary and colloquial discourse. As a summary of the description of the pragmatic approach in this analysis, the following diagram visualises how Relevance Theory applies to Malay possessive phrases (as shown in Figure 1).

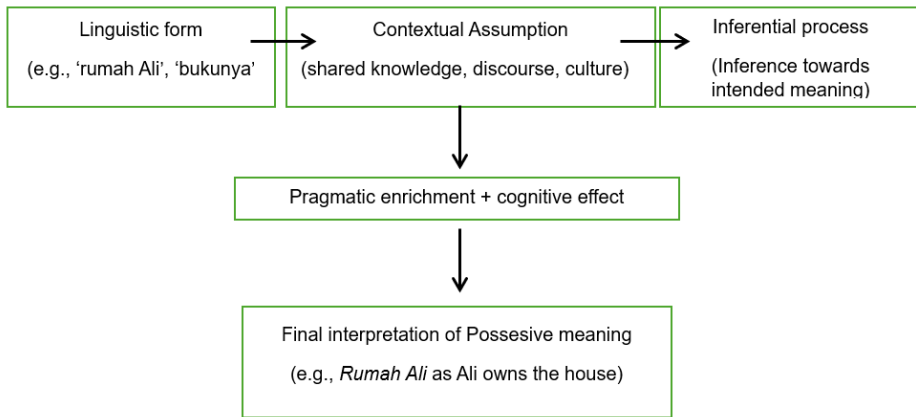


Figure 1. Application of Relevance Theory to the interpretation of Malay possessive phrases

Data Collection

The data or samples are compiled through keyword searches within the DBP corpus. Keywords such as *rumah* and *basikal* that formed possessive noun phrases (e.g., *rumah + saya*, *basikal + saya*), instances of the enclitic *-nya* (e.g., *rumahnya*, *basikalnya*) and *punya* are extracted to ensure a representative dataset. This examples of possessive noun phrases generated from the corpus database are based on samples of possessive noun phrases given in *Tatabahasa Dewan* (2015, 369) and sufficient enough to be analysed in the next section. A total of 338 concordances of *basikalnya* and 100 concordances of *rumahnya* from all types of text and across all decades were generated as samples of possessive constructions. For N + N constructions (based on head + possessive pronoun sample given in *Tatabahasa Dewan* [2015, 369] that is *rumah saya*), a total of 259 concordances from the first 2,000 concordances from all types of text and across all decades were generated. For data on *punya*, a total of 14,393 concordances has been generated from the corpus database of DBP. The construction of possessive phrases with the word *punya* is strong evidence that shows that there is a construction of possessive noun phrases that have a clear clue for the meaning of possession in Malay speech, especially in oral form.

The collected data will be a strong basis for both possessive noun phrases be analysed from three perspectives, which are:

1. Morphological analysis – Examining the presence and function of *-nya* in possessive constructions.

2. Syntactic analysis – Representing possessive structures through tree diagrams to illustrate hierarchical relationships
3. Pragmatic analysis – Investigating how context influences the interpretation of possession in Malay.

These three perspectives allow for a detailed investigation, demonstrating that possession in Malay can be inferred through contextual and relevance-based interpretation rather than formal markers.

As the objectives of this study are to analyse the possessive noun phrases and the grammatical behaviour of possession rather than specific lexical semantics or lexical distribution, any nouns could serve as the head in these constructions. The corpus extraction was intended to confirm the natural occurrence of these patterns in authentic Malay usage, thereby providing empirical evidence that Malay speakers employ both structures to represent possessive relationships. The number of concordances retrieved was not intended to serve as a quantitative variable, but rather as a means of verifying usage across contexts and registers. The focus of the study is therefore explanatory rather than statistical: it seeks to account for how and why Malay speakers interpret N + N structures as possessive, even in the absence of overt morphological marking.

Findings

The findings of this study are systematically categorised into three key areas: (1) morphological analysis of possessive noun phrases, (2) syntactic analysis of possessive noun phrases in Malay and (3) pragmatic analysis of possessive noun phrases in Malay. Each section provides a comprehensive examination of how possessive noun phrases are structured, interpreted and function within the Malay language from a morphosyntactic and pragmatic perspective.

Morphological analysis of possessive noun phrases

From a morphological perspective, *-nya* functions as a clitic that conveys possession within noun phrases structures. The enclitic appears in specific constructions where it follows the noun, as illustrated in Examples 1 to 3.

Example 1:

Rumahnya cantik. (His/her house is beautiful.)

Example 2:

Bukunya tebal. (His/her book is thick.)

Example 3:

Kereta-keretanya rosak. (His/her cars are damaged.)

The enclitic *-nya* is obligatory in these cases, as removing it results in ungrammatical sentences, as shown in Examples 4 to 6.

Example 4:

Rumah cantik. (Intended: The house is beautiful.)

Example 5:

Buku tebal. (Intended: The book is thick.)

Example 6:

Kereta-kereta rosak. (Intended: The cars are damaged.)

The ungrammaticality of Examples 4 to 6 demonstrates that *-nya* is not merely a modifier but functions as a complement, marking possession in the noun phrase's structure. This finding is consistent with previous studies on possessive clitics in agglutinative languages, where possession is encoded within the nominal hierarchy rather than through separate possessive pronouns (Bartos 1999; Dékány 2015). Figure 2 presents a syntactic tree diagram representing the structure of *rumahnya* (his/her house), illustrating how *-nya* is integrated as a functional head within the noun phrase hierarchy.

As shown in Figure 2, *-nya* occupies a structural position within the noun phrase hierarchy, forming a direct syntactic relationship with the noun *rumah*. This supports the argument that *-nya* is not an independent pronoun but a bound morpheme that is syntactically required for possessive interpretation. The role of *-nya* as a possessive clitic in Malay aligns with findings in other languages where possession is indicated through cliticisation rather than inflectional morphology. In Hungarian, for example, possessive markers appear as enclitics attached to the noun (Bartos 1999), while in Finno-Ugric languages, possessive morphemes function within the nominal phrase hierarchy (Dékány 2015). Compared to Indo-European languages, which rely on possessive determiners or inflectional suffixes, Malay exhibits a clitic-based possessive system. In English, for instance, possession is marked by *'s* (John's book) or possessive pronouns (his book), whereas Malay primarily relies on noun phrase + *-nya* (Radiah 2014). This suggests that Malay's possessive constructions are structurally closer to agglutinative languages than to languages with case-based possession marking. The findings of this study provide important insights into the morphosyntactic structure of Malay possessive noun phrases. By demonstrating that *-nya* functions as a syntactic complement rather than a

simple modifier, this research refines our understanding of how possession is encoded in Malay grammar. The theoretical implications extend to linguistic typology, particularly in classifying Malay within a broader cross-linguistic framework of possessive constructions. From a practical perspective, these findings have applications in language learning and teaching. Understanding the obligatory role of *-nya* in possessive constructions can help non-native learners avoid grammatical errors and develop a more accurate understanding of Malay syntax. Additionally, this study contributes to comparative linguistic research by situating Malay within the typology of possessive marking strategies across languages.

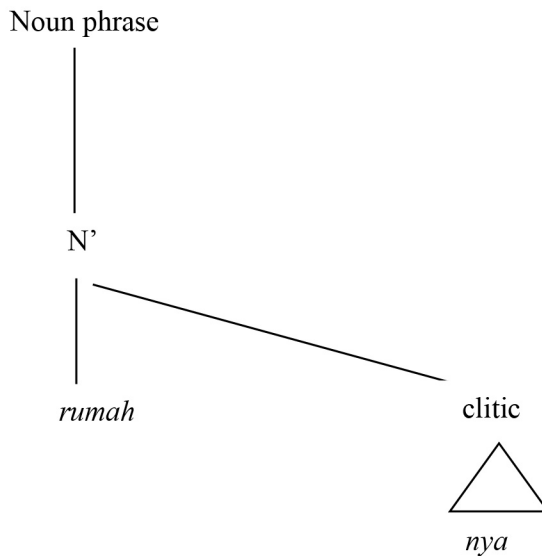


Figure 2. Tree diagram of the possessive noun phrase *rumahnya*

Syntactic analysis of possessive noun phrases in Malay

From a syntactic perspective, possessive noun phrases in Malay demonstrate unique case assignment properties. Unlike Indo-European languages such as English and Spanish, which mark possession through pronominal inflection (e.g., “mine”, “theirs” in English; *las mías*, *la nuestra* in Spanish) or possessive determiners (e.g., “my book” in English, *mis libros* in Spanish), Malay expresses possession through a juxtaposition of two nouns (noun + noun) without any morphological modification (Radiyah 2014). This distinguishes Malay possessive constructions from other languages such as Japanese, which employs the *no* particle (*watashi no kaban* [my bag]) and Mandarin, which uses *de* (*wǒ de shū* [my book]). Most grammatical descriptions of Malay categorise possessive

In an alternative syntactic analysis, possessiveness is treated as an inherent property of the noun phrase, where the modifying noun (*adik*) acts as a possessive complement, forming a possessive noun phrase without additional functional markers (as shown in Figure 4).

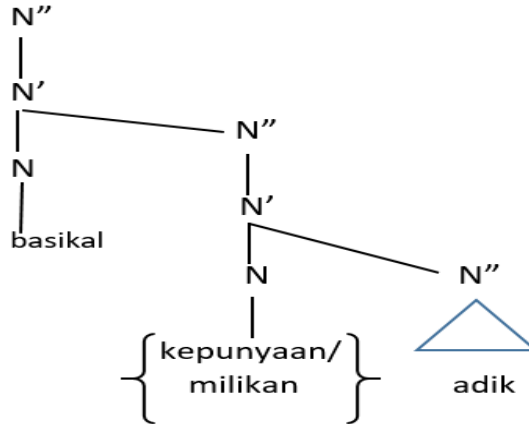


Figure 4. Syntactic tree of the possessive noun phrase *basikal kepunyaan/milikan adik*

A similar pattern is observed in phrases like *ibu atlit para* (mother of the athlete), which can be syntactically expanded by inserting the preposition *kepada* (to) before *atlit para* to clarify the relationship. This suggests that in Malay, the possessor is syntactically positioned as a complement rather than an explicit genitive marker (as shown in Figure 5).

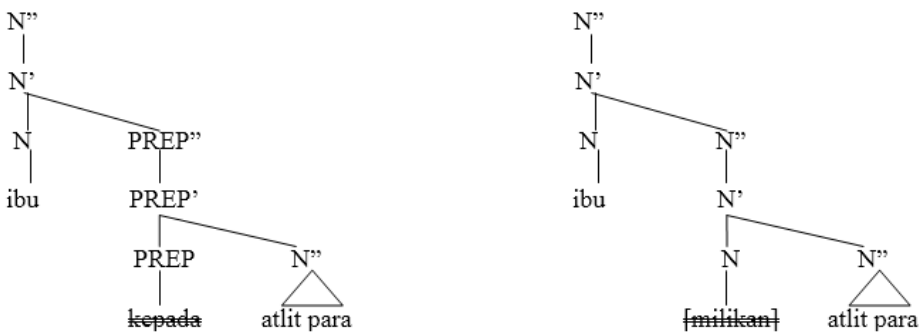


Figure 5. Syntactic tree of *ibu (kepada) atlit para*

The syntactic expansion of elements enables the interpretation of meaning and the characteristics that can be highlighted by a syntactic structure in the head + modifier construction [TBD]. One potential argument supporting the

claim that the noun phrases in Examples 7(a) and 7(b) convey possession is the possibility that the noun phrases themselves inherently encode possession. Anagnostopoulou and Sevdali (2020) also discuss possession in both Classical Greek and Modern Greek, demonstrating that possessive noun phrases can be classified into alienable possession (where ownership can be transferred, as shown in Example 7[a]) and inalienable possession (where ownership is inherent and inseparable, such as body parts, as shown in Example 7[b]).

Example 7:

(a) *O Jani-s (tis) katestre-pse tis Marias*

the Janis-NOM (her.CL.GEN) destroyed-PST.3SG the Maria-GEN
athela-tu to podhilato (tis)
without intent the bicycle.ACC (her)
Janis unintentionally broke Maria's bicycle.

Source: Anagnostopoulou and Sevdali (2020, 106)

(b) *O Jani-s tis eko-pse (tis Maria-s) xtes*

the Janis-NOM her.CL.GEN cut.PST.3SG the Maria-GEN yesterday
ta malia hair (tis)
The hair (her)
Janis cut Maria's yesterday.

Source: Anagnostopoulou and Sevdali (2020, 106)

Based on the sentences in Examples 7(a) and 7(b), Anagnostopoulou and Sevdali (2020) argue that the possessor can be expressed as a genitive noun phrase or as a clitic in a double-genitive noun phrase. In Example 7(b), the possessive noun phrase is separated by an adverb, further illustrating that genitive case can appear on both the noun phrase and the clitic. Possessive constructions in Turkish can also be expressed using a noun phrase as a required argument within the predicate (Öztürk and Taylan 2016), as seen in the next example.

Example 7(c):

On-un baba-sı Ali'nin de baba-sı.

he-GEN father-POSS Ali-GEN too father-POSS

His father is also Ali's father.

Based on the study by Anagnostopoulou and Sevdali (2020), possessive noun phrases can be expressed beyond just clitics. Their research demonstrates that certain languages encode possessive features directly onto the noun phrase itself or onto the dative case. The argument that possessive features are encoded on either the noun phrase or the dative case is further supported by the findings of Dékány (2015). He posits that personal pronouns receive case from the dative. For instance, in Table 1, it is hypothesised that possessive features may be encoded within prepositions, as illustrated in the following examples.

Example 8:

basikal saya (my bicycle)

Example 9:

basikal untuk saya (bicycle for me)

Example 10:

basikal kepunyaan/milik saya (bicycle belonging to me)

These findings suggest that possessive meaning in some languages is derived from case-marking systems or bound morphemes. In contrast, Malay does not exhibit case marking in possessive noun phrases but still conveys possession through syntactic juxtaposition. Dékány (2015) argues that pronouns receive case assignment from dative sources, which may apply to Malay possessive structures. For instance: This supports the hypothesis that Malay possessive noun phrases may derive possessive meaning through an abstract case-assignment mechanism rather than explicit morphological marking. This can be further explained using syntactic tree structures, showing how possessive noun phrases move to specifier positions to receive case assignment, as shown in Figure 6.

Based on Figure 6, the noun phrase *basikal saya* can acquire a possessive aspect when the noun phrase is raised to the specifier position. Figure 6 illustrates that the noun phrase *basikal saya* possesses a possessive aspect. The possessive case assigned to the functional phrase motivates the noun phrase to move to the specifier position of the functional head (the verb phrase shell) (Lee-Schoenfeld 2016). The noun phrase can still acquire a possessive case since the dative case merges with the theta role at the level of the prepositional phrase *kepada* (to), which maintains a relational connection with the functional head

(Lee-Schoenfeld 2016). Consequently, the prepositional phrase *kepada* does not need to be overtly realised to express *basikal kepada saya* (bicycle to me) or possession transfer, as this prepositional phrase has already assigned the possessive case to the noun phrase in the specifier position. The argument that noun phrases receive case assignment abstractly suggests that certain noun phrases exhibit possessive aspects even though they do not bear an explicit possessive case, as seen in English. This discussion indicates that possessive noun phrases in Malay can involve either an owner whose possessed object is transferable or an owner whose possessed object is non-transferable. The positioning of the possessor and the possessed object depends on the movement of the noun phrase to the specifier position. Therefore, evidence from inherent case assignment and the possessive pronoun *-nya* suggests that noun phrases in Malay encode possession. Consider the following examples in Table 2.

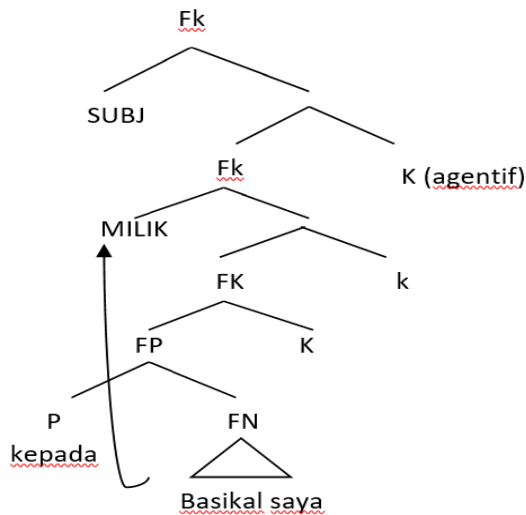


Figure 6. Syntactic tree of the possessive phrase *basikal saya* moving to the specifier position

Table 2. Head + possessive modifier structure

| Inti + penerang | Head + modifier |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>rumah + saya</i> | (house + my) |
| <i>basikal + adik</i> | (bicycle + younger sibling) |
| <i>bumbung + sekolah</i> | (roof + school) |
| <i>baju + kakak</i> | (shirt + elder sister) |
| <i>kereta + Sarah</i> | (car + Sarah) |

The constructions in Table 2 do not inherently encode possession or ownership. These noun phrase constructions merely juxtapose two lexical items, where the modifying lexical unit does not necessarily function to denote possession. This differs significantly from possessive constructions in Japanese, where the N + no (noun + particle) structure explicitly marks genitive relations, as in *watashi + NO + kabanwa* (my + POSSESSIVE + bag). When compared to other head + modifier noun phrase structures, possessive constructions (as shown in Table 2) remain distinct, as the modifying noun phrase (noun) in other noun phrase constructions tends to encode a clear meaning, as classified by linguists, as the example given in Table 3.

Table 3. Noun phrase: Head and modifier

| Head (noun) | Modifier (noun) | Head (noun) | Modifier (noun) |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Noun | Modifier denoting ancestry | Noun | Modifier denoting type |
| <i>orang</i> (person) | <i>Melayu</i> (Malay person) | <i>beg</i> (bag) | <i>plastik</i> (plastic bag) |
| <i>kaum</i> (ethnic) | <i>Kadazan</i> (Kadazan ethnic group) | <i>kerusi</i> (chair) | <i>kayu</i> (wooden chair) |
| Head (noun) | Modifier (noun) | Head (noun) | Modifier (noun) |
| Noun (agent/instrument) | Modifier denoting recipient | Noun (agent/instrument) | Modifier denoting function |
| <i>pemandu</i> (driver) | <i>bas</i> (bus driver) | <i>getah</i> (rubber) | <i>pemadam</i> (eraser) |
| <i>pengurus</i> (manager) | <i>syarikat</i> (company manager) | <i>pita</i> (tape) | <i>pengukur</i> (measuring tape) |
| Head (noun) | Modifier (noun) | Head (noun) | Modifier (noun) |
| Noun (agent/instrument) | Modifier denoting gender | Noun (agent/instrument) | Modifier denoting location |
| <i>anak</i> (child) | <i>lelaki</i> (male child) | <i>kawasan</i> (area) | <i>bandar</i> (urban area) |
| <i>kambing</i> (goat) | <i>jantan</i> (male goat) | <i>penduduk</i> (resident) | <i>kampung</i> (village resident) |

(Continued on next page)

Table 3. (Continued)

| Head (noun) | Modifier (noun) |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Noun (agent/ instrument) | Modifier denoting event/concept |
| <i>majlis</i> (ceremony) | <i>perasmian</i> (inauguration event) |
| <i>garisan</i> (line) | <i>permulaan</i> (starting line) |

The head + modifier noun phrase constructions in Table 3 are clearly distinct from the head + possessive modifier constructions because the modifying nouns in Table 3 encode specific meanings. For example, the modifier *Melayu* (Malay) explicitly encodes an ethnic classification, clearly specifying lineage. Additionally, derived nouns such as *pemadam* (eraser) and *pengukur* (measuring tape) reinforce their instrumental function due to their prefix *peN-*, further strengthening the overall phrase meaning. For example, in agent or instrument + recipient constructions:

Pemandu + bas (bus driver)

Pengurus + syarikat (company manager)

However, possessive noun phrase constructions differ significantly, as the combination of the head and modifier does not always explicitly encode possession. The modifying noun in possessive noun phrase constructions does not necessarily clarify possession in relation to the head noun. Thus, why do native Malay speakers use such possessive constructions and why can listeners interpret them as indicating possession despite their surface structure lacking an explicit possessive marker, unlike what has been traditionally described in linguistic studies?

Pragmatic analysis of possessive noun phrases in Malay

The morphological and syntactic analyses of possessive noun phrases in Malay primarily describe the surface forms as spoken or written by Malay language users. However, these analyses are limited to the formal structure of noun phrases and rely on derivational or transformational possibilities without explaining how possessive noun phrases are comprehended as encoding ownership or possession. Due to the limitations of morphological and syntactic perspectives, a pragmatic approach is adopted. In pragmatics, language is not only examined in terms of its structure but also in terms of

how it is used and how utterances or sentences are interpreted in context. From a pragmatic standpoint, particularly within the framework of Relevance Theory as proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1995), possessive noun phrases adhere to cognitive principles governing human communication. According to Blakemore (1992), Relevance Theory aims to explain the mental processes involved in interpreting utterances and information. The theory posits that humans naturally seek out the most relevant information with the least cognitive effort when processing utterances or information. In communication, speakers attempt to convey the most relevant information to the listener based on the listener's contextual situation, expecting that the listener will interpret the utterance in a way that is optimally relevant to their circumstances (Sperber and Wilson 1995). Consequently, when processing an utterance, listeners strive for an interpretation that achieves optimal relevance, where the interpretation generates sufficient cognitive effects without requiring excessive processing effort. According to Sperber and Wilson (2002), a listener processes any external stimuli or internal representations that serve as input for cognitive processing and links them to background knowledge available at that moment.

In the context of possessive noun phrases, Relevance Theory provides an explanation for why these constructions exist and how Malay speakers understand them as encoding possession. According to the Relevance Theory, possessive noun phrases in Malay serve as cognitive inputs that are easily interpretable by listeners due to the combination of input, context and shared background knowledge (Sperber and Wilson 1995). There are three ways in which new information (input) is linked to existing contextual assumptions to achieve cognitive effects: (1) integration – incorporating new information into an existing cognitive structure, (2) reinforcement – strengthening existing assumptions and (3) contradiction and elimination – challenging and rejecting prior assumptions.

In the case of possessive noun phrases, their internal structure (as discussed in the syntactic section) serves as background knowledge stored in the cognitive system of Malay speakers. The Relevance Theory refers to such background knowledge as encyclopaedic entries, which allow possessive noun phrases to be encoded and understood as indicating ownership or possession, even though their literal form (head noun + modifier noun) does not explicitly encode possession.

From a pragmatic perspective, the possessive meaning of noun phrases becomes more apparent when they appear in sentences. For example, in the sentence: *Basikal saya yang rosak itu sudah dibaiki semalam* (My bicycle that was damaged has been repaired yesterday). Contextual elements such as *rosak* (damaged) and

sudah dibaiki (has been repaired) help the listener to infer the overall meaning of the utterance and understand the noun phrase *Basikal saya yang rosak itu* (My bicycle that was damaged) as conveying possession.

Thus, possessive noun phrases conform to the Principle of Communicative Relevance, which states that every ostensive act of communication conveys an assumption of its optimal relevance. Possessive noun phrases serve as ostensive stimuli that are relevant and appropriate given the speaker's choices and abilities. Malay speakers can understand possessive noun phrases such as *basikal saya* (my bicycle), *rumah saya* (my house) and *buku Aiman* (Aiman's book) because these constructions originate from an earlier colloquial form, namely: *Saya punya basikal* (I have a bicycle), *Saya punya rumah* (I have a house) and *Aiman punya buku* (Aiman has a book). A corpus search for *punya* in the DBP text corpus across all text types and years yielded 14,393 concordance results. A few extracted data are shown as examples in Table 4.

Table 4. *Punya* usage in possessive constructions from the DBP text corpus

| Example in Malay | English translation |
|--|--|
| <i>Saya dengar itu orang baca al-Quran, saya rasa macam saya punya badan floating, melayang-layang dan very very touching.</i> (IMAM 1995) | I heard that person recite the Quran and I felt like my body was floating, drifting and very, very touching. |
| <i>Saya punya prinsip adalah untuk memindahkan kepakaran dan pengalaman saya kepada jurulatih...</i> (Indra 2001) | My principle is to transfer my expertise and experience to the coach... |
| <i>Pak Akob, itu kamu punya anak, ada pandaikah?</i> (Sinappapal 2019) | Pak Akob, is that your child? Is he smart? |
| <i>Dia punya rumah ada telefonkah?</i> (Tukang Ensera 2001) | Does his house have a telephone? |
| <i>Dia cari dia punya bini.</i> (Citra Sastra 1991) | He is looking for his wife. |
| <i>Hotel Malaya ini kami punya.</i> (Kumpulan Drama Pahlawan Daerah Rodat 2014) | This Malaya Hotel belongs to us. |
| <i>Dia punya aset sekarang ini RM91 juta.</i> (DR 23092003 2003) | His assets now amount to RM91 million. |
| <i>Tak' ada enche', tolong-lah enche'; ini barang orang punya bukan saya punya.</i> (Amrun Sastra 1966) | There is none, sir, please sir; this thing belongs to someone else, not me. |

Source: DBP (2025)

Each of these sentences can be rewritten without *punya* while still conveying the same possessive meaning in Table 5.

Table 5. Possessive constructions without *punya* in the DBP text corpus

| Example in Malay (Without <i>punya</i>) | English translation |
|--|--|
| <i>Saya dengar itu orang baca al-Quran, saya rasa macam badan saya floating, melayang-layang dan very very touching.</i> | I heard that person recite the Quran and I felt like my body was floating, drifting and very, very touching. |
| <i>Prinsip saya adalah untuk memindahkan kepakaran dan pengalaman saya kepada jurulatih...</i> | My principle is to transfer my expertise and experience to the coach... |
| <i>Pak Akob, itu anak kamu, ada pandaiakah?</i> | Pak Akob, is that your child? Is he smart? |
| <i>Rumahnya ada telefonkah?</i> | Does his house have a telephone? |

These corpus findings indicate that variation in possessive constructions, particularly those using *punya*, has existed for a long time. Background knowledge about sentences like these, stored as encyclopaedic entries in speakers' cognition, allows possessive noun phrases to be understood without the need for *punya* as an explicit possessive marker. The findings of this study contribute significantly to the theoretical understanding of possessive noun phrases in Malay by offering a pragmatic explanation for their existence and comprehension. Unlike previous morphosyntactic analyses, which focus solely on structural properties, this study highlights the role of context, shared background knowledge and cognitive processing in interpreting possession. By applying Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995), the study demonstrates how Malay speakers rely on minimal processing effort while achieving optimal communicative efficiency. This reinforces the notion that linguistic economy plays a crucial role in the evolution of possessive constructions, where speakers naturally gravitate toward the most cognitively efficient forms of expression.

From a practical perspective, the study has important implications for language teaching and corpus-based linguistics. In the field of language education, understanding how Malay speakers infer possession without explicit grammatical markers is essential for second-language learners, particularly those whose native languages rely on possessive determiners or inflectional morphology. Teaching strategies should emphasise how possession is pragmatically inferred rather than explicitly marked, helping learners develop a more intuitive grasp of Malay possessive structures. Additionally, the study offers insights into corpus-based linguistic research by highlighting the extensive use of *punya* in both spoken and historical texts. The frequent occurrence of *punya* suggests

an ongoing linguistic shift toward more economical possessive structures in contemporary Malay, reflecting broader trends in language simplification and efficiency. These findings open avenues for further research on the diachronic development of possessive markers and their role in Malay language change.

Discussion

The findings of this study contribute significantly to our understanding of possessive noun phrases in Malay by integrating morphosyntactic and pragmatic analyses. The study confirms that possession in Malay is inferred more through contextual and cognitive factors than through explicit grammatical markers, a phenomenon that aligns with previous research on typological variations in possessive constructions (Ke 2023; Niu 2015). The results underscore the role of pragmatic inference in Malay, demonstrating that native speakers rely on shared knowledge and discourse context rather than formal syntactic markers such as genitive case inflection, as seen in Indo-European languages (Espan̄l-Echevarr̄a 1997; Alexiadou 2003).

This study finds that Malay possessive noun phrases predominantly follow a head noun + modifier structure, with possession being inferred rather than explicitly marked. This structure contrasts with English, which employs possessive determiners and with Spanish and Turkish, which use explicit genitive markers (Espan̄l-Echevarr̄a 1997). The morphological analysis of *-nya* in this study supports previous work by Nik Safiah et al. (2015) and Radiah (2014), which suggests that *-nya* functions as an enclitic possessive marker but is not obligatory for possessive interpretation. The syntactic analysis confirms that the omission of *-nya* does not necessarily lead to ambiguity, reinforcing the argument that possessive meaning in Malay emerges from discourse context rather than from a fixed syntactic rule.

This suggests that Malay operates within a broader typological category of languages that prioritise pragmatic over syntactic encoding of possession. A significant contribution of this study is its application of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995) to the interpretation of Malay possessive noun phrases. The findings confirm that Malay speakers infer possessive relationships by optimising communicative relevance, allowing them to interpret possessive noun phrases efficiently without requiring explicit possessive markers. The study demonstrates that background knowledge, discourse context and cognitive salience play a critical role in the interpretation process, reinforcing previous research on the interaction between morphosyntax and pragmatics (Lin 2003).

Corpus data from the DBP support this claim by illustrating how possessive meaning is retained even in cases where *punya* is omitted. Historical corpus analysis shows that *punya* previously functioned as a more explicit possessive marker but has declined in frequency over time, aligning with linguistic trends toward economy and efficiency (Givón 2009). This suggests that Malay is undergoing a linguistic shift in which possession is increasingly inferred rather than explicitly marked, mirroring similar developments in other languages with a strong pragmatic component in possessive constructions. A cross-linguistic comparison reveals important insights into how different languages encode possession. While English employs possessive determiners such as *my* and *his* and Spanish uses *de* constructions (e.g., *el libro de Juan*), Malay relies primarily on word order and pragmatic inference. Similarly, Mandarin and Japanese omit explicit possessive markers when context is sufficient to establish possessive meaning, suggesting that these languages share a cognitive approach to possessive interpretation (Ke 2023; Niu 2015). Turkish, in contrast, employs a dual strategy where possession is marked through both case morphology and clitics (Öztürk and Taylan 2016). These findings suggest that Malay's possessive system is structurally more similar to East Asian languages than to Indo-European ones. However, further research is needed to determine whether this typological similarity extends beyond possessive noun phrases into other syntactic domains.

The findings have significant implications for second-language acquisition. For learners of Malay whose first languages rely heavily on explicit possessive determiners (such as English or Spanish), the absence of overt possessive markers may pose challenges in comprehension and production. Teaching strategies should emphasise the role of contextual inference and discourse-based interpretation, rather than relying solely on syntactic instruction. Additionally, the study contributes to linguistic typology by positioning Malay within a broader framework of possession encoding. The findings support previous research suggesting that languages differ not only in their use of morphological markers for possession but also in the extent to which they rely on pragmatic inference. This underscores the need for further cross-linguistic research to examine how possessive meaning is processed cognitively across different linguistic systems.

While this study provides valuable insights into the morphosyntactic and pragmatic aspects of Malay possessive noun phrases, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study focuses primarily on written corpus data, which may not fully capture the nuances of spoken Malay. Future research should incorporate spoken data to explore whether the omission of possessive markers

is more prevalent in informal speech than in formal writing. Second, while this study highlights the historical decline of *punya* as a possessive marker, further diachronic analysis is required to determine whether this trend continues across different Malay dialects. Investigating dialectal variations in possessive constructions could provide a deeper understanding of how linguistic economy influences syntactic change over time. Third, the study relies on cross-linguistic comparisons with selected languages (English, Spanish, Mandarin, Japanese and Turkish). Expanding the comparison to include other Austronesian languages could offer insights into whether possessive inference is a shared trait across the language family or whether it is unique to Malay.

Conclusion

This study comprehensively analyses possessive noun phrases in Malay by integrating morphosyntactic and pragmatic perspectives. The findings confirm that possession in Malay is primarily inferred rather than explicitly marked, aligning with typological patterns observed in other languages that rely on discourse-based interpretation. The morphological analysis demonstrates that the enclitic *-nya* functions as an optional possessive marker rather than a syntactic necessity, supporting the argument that possessive meaning is constructed through contextual cues. The syntactic analysis highlights how Malay possessive noun phrases exhibit a head noun + modifier structure, wherein possession is derived from discourse positioning rather than genitive case marking or possessive determiners, as seen in Indo-European languages. A significant contribution of this study is its application of Relevance Theory to the interpretation of Malay possessive noun phrases, which illustrates how Malay speakers achieve optimal communicative efficiency by relying on minimal linguistic input. Corpus analysis further reveals that the possessive marker *punya*, while historically significant, is increasingly omitted in contemporary usage without impeding comprehension. This linguistic shift suggests a broader trend toward economy in Malay possessive constructions; paralleling developments observed in Mandarin and Japanese. These findings contribute to linguistic typology by positioning Malay within a broader cross-linguistic framework of possession encoding, particularly in relation to East Asian languages. The study also has implications for second-language acquisition, emphasising the need to teach learners how possession is pragmatically inferred rather than relying on explicit markers. Future research should explore spoken data and dialectal variations to further understand the role of pragmatic inference in Malay possessive constructions and its implications for language evolution.

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