

# Whence the Austronesian Indirect Possession Construction?

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Possession in some Austronesian languages shows levels of elaboration far in excess of cross-linguistic norms, while in others it is strikingly unelaborated. The appearance of alienable/inalienable contrasts has been assumed to result from contact with Papuan languages, and the existence of a paradigm of indirect possessive classifiers is cited as one of the pieces of evidence for the Oceanic subgroup, while acknowledging that indirect possession constructions can be found in Malayo-Polynesian languages further west. We argue that the appearance of possessive classifiers in these languages is also the result of contact with Papuan languages west of New Guinea.

## 1. THE PROBLEM OF OCEANIC POSSESSION WITHIN AUSTRONESIAN.<sup>1</sup>

Most Austronesian languages of the Pacific have a complex system of possession that contrasts direct with indirect strategies, and have multiple classifiers for the indirect possession (Lynch, Ross, and Crowley 2002). This is shown with Fijian data in (1). In (1a) the noun ‘head’ is possessed inalienably, and the possessor is marked directly on the noun itself. In (1b–d) various kinds of alienable relationships are encoded through a “possessive classifier,” which takes the possessive agreement marking and indicates the class of possession that exists between the possessor and the possessed.

### (1) FIJIAN

a. na	ulu-mu		b. na	me-mu	wai
ART	head-2SG		ART	DRINK-2SG	water
	‘your head’			‘your water (to drink)’	
c. na	ke-mu	dalo	d. na	no-mu	vale
ART	EDIBLE-2SG	taro	ART	GENERAL-2SG	house
	‘your taro (to eat)’			‘your house’	

The suite of morphemes that make up this system of possession has often been cited as one of the pieces of evidence for the Oceanic subgroup (e.g., Pawley 1973), with now three indirect possessive stems (\*na-, \*ka-, and \*m<sup>(w)</sup>a-), as well as the direct strategy, able to be reconstructed to Proto-Oceanic. While the etymology of the indirect possessive classifiers has attracted a considerable amount of research (e.g., Lynch 1982, Lichtenberk 1985), the construction, if not the forms that are found in Oceanic, is attested in languages

1. Thanks to Marian Klamer, John Lynch, and an anonymous referee for comments that substantially improved the clarity and argumentation of this paper.

of the South Halmahera–West New Guinea subgroup, the sisters of Oceanic, and in different forms in languages of Maluku. In more conservative Austronesian languages equivalents of the “direct” construction in (1a), are found, but there are no equivalents of (1b–d).

In this paper we sketch a scenario for the appearance of the direct/indirect contrast in possessive constructions in Austronesian languages. We examine the distribution of alienable/inalienable contrasts, and the appearance of prefixal possessive marking in the Indonesia/Sahul region, drawing on new materials from the Papuan languages of the Timor-Alor-Pantar region, and incorporating recent work on reconstruction of morphology in these languages (Donohue and Schapper 2007). This material is shown here to support our argument concerning the appearance of the indirect possession construction.

The following section discusses the distribution of the two main variables in the description of possessive constructions that we shall be examining. We briefly examine the conservative possessive construction found in most non-Oceanic Austronesian languages, followed by examples of possessive structures in the Austronesian languages spoken in the area immediately west of New Guinea. In this region we see both the use of prefixal possession in addition to the inherited suffixal construction, and the first appearance of possessive classifiers. Finally we examine possessive structures in Papuan languages from the same area, finding a source for the prefixal structures, a source for indirect possession structures, and a functional link between the two.

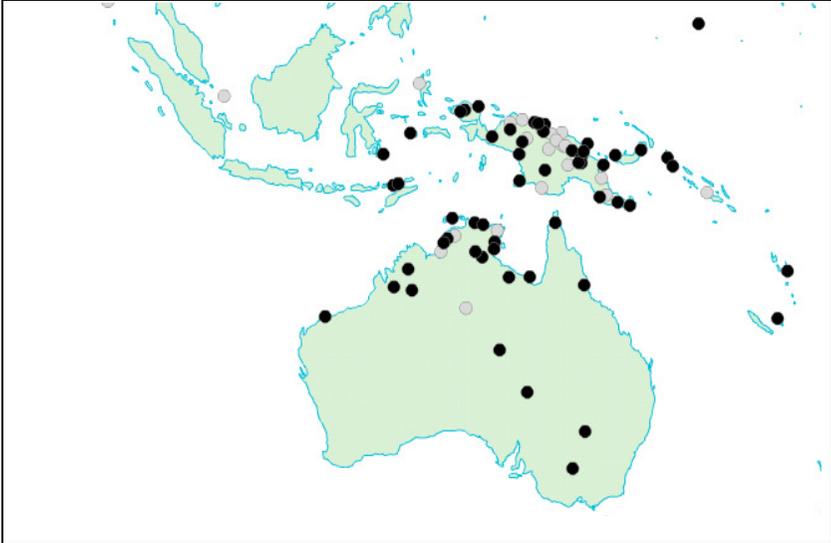
**2. POSSESSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS: A WIDER PERSPECTIVE.** Three paired variables are relevant to the discussion, (1) the presence or absence of possessive classifiers, which is dependent on (2) the presence or absence of alienable/inalienable contrasts, and (3) the position of possessive affixes on the possessum. In (1) we saw instances of a difference between alienable and inalienable possession, with alienable possession involving the use of possessive classifiers in (1b–d), while inalienable possession is marked directly on the possessum in (1a). Map 1 shows the distribution of alienable/inalienable contrasts in the New Guinea region; clearly this contrast, shown in black, is modal across the New Guinea–Australia area. (Gray dots in maps 1 and 2 indicate languages in Dryer’s 2005 or Nichols and Bickel’s 2005 surveys that do not show the feature under discussion.) Away from this Sahul region, the languages of Asia typically do not maintain such a contrast (Nichols and Bickel 2005); the same is true of central and western Indonesia.

While most Austronesian languages, Oceanic and otherwise, mark possession on the possessum by means of suffixes or enclitics, the languages of New Guinea and north-west and north-central Australia typically mark possession by prefix (Dryer 2005).<sup>2</sup> This preference for prefixes is also found in a number of Austronesian languages immediately west of New Guinea. This region is the one in which, from historical evidence, a Papuan presence must be posited (Donohue 2007a). This is relevant to the adoption of possessive classifiers, as will be discussed in sections 4 and 5.

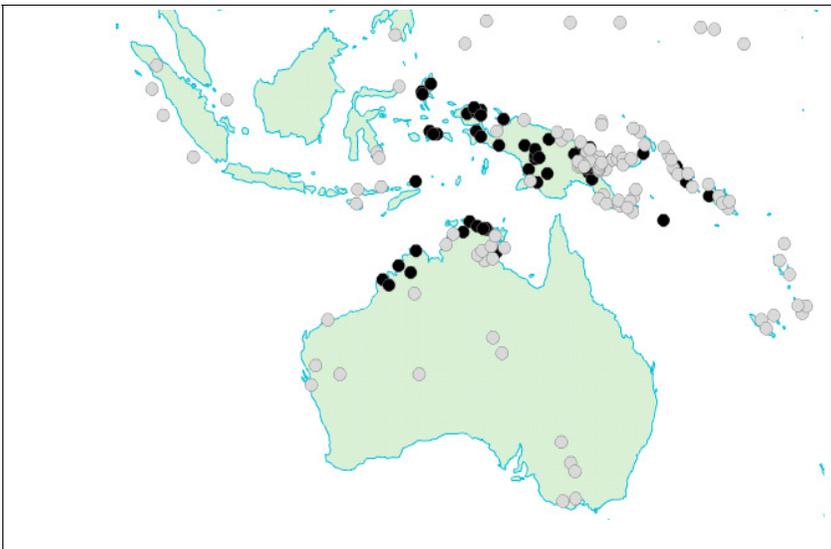
2. A reviewer points out that Kove (New Britain) and Wayan Fijian are two Oceanic languages that mark possession by prefix. Kove is spoken in an area where Papuan influence can still be documented, making the argument from sections 4–6 directly applicable. Fijian is not spoken near any extant Papuan languages, but, as with all Oceanic languages, has passed through areas in which Papuan languages dominate.

The New Guinea-centric distribution of these traits strongly suggests that the appearance of traits related to these in the Oceanic languages should be related to their presence in the Papuan languages west of New Guinea, as earlier suggested by Grimes (1991:292), Ross (2001:138), and others.

**MAP 1. THE DISTRIBUTION OF ALIENABLE/INALIENABLE CONTRASTS**



**MAP 2. THE DISTRIBUTION OF PREFIXAL POSSESSION**



### 3. SINGLE POSSESSIVE CLASSES IN CONSERVATIVE LANGUAGES.

Although the more conservative Austronesian languages do not contrast alienable and inalienable possessive constructions, the presence of more than one possessive construction is not uncommon. The Tagalog examples showing pronominal possession in (2) are typical of the more conservative northern systems: there are two constructions, one involving the genitive enclitics that appear (more or less) directly on the possessum, and one involving the independent dative pronouns (that typically, though not exclusively, appear pronominally).

(2) TAGALOG

a. ang tiyan=ko  
 NOM stomach=1SG.GEN  
 ‘my stomach’

b. ang aki(n)-ng tiyan  
 NOM 1SG.DAT-LNKR stomach  
 ‘my stomach’

c. ang tiya(n)-ng akin  
 NOM stomach-LNKR 1SG.DAT  
 ‘my stomach’

While an alienable/inalienable contrast is absent in the more conservative Austronesian languages of the west and north, one of the preconditions that would ease the way for the establishment of such a contrast, namely the presence of more than one possessive construction in the noun phrase, is widespread.<sup>3</sup>

**4. DIRECT/INDIRECT OPPOSITIONS IN AUSTRONESIAN.** In addition to alienable/inalienable contrasts, a number of morphologically distinct possessive constructions appear in different guises in eastern Indonesia. In central Maluku the existence of two different affix sets, one prefixal and one suffixal, is associated with the contrast between alienable and inalienable possession, as shown in (3) (Laidig 1993, drawing on Streseman 1918). Note that, as is typical for Central Maluku (Collins 1983), the innovative *prefixal* affixes are used to mark alienable possession, while the historically prior *suffixal* use is reserved for inalienable possession. There is no independent possessor construction in Paulohi, in contrast to the dative construction seen in Tagalog in (2), and also in contrast to a number of other languages of Central Maluku.

(3) PAULOHI

a. ni-utu  
 3POSS-lice  
 ‘her/his/their lice’

b. nife-ni  
 tooth-3POSS  
 ‘her/his/their teeth’

Among the Eastern Malayo-Polynesian languages of South Halmahera and West New Guinea, the closest relatives of Proto-Oceanic, it is normal to have a contrast between direct and indirect possession (van den Berg n.d.). In Ambai, for instance, the majority of nouns use suffixes to index the possessor on a possessive “classifier,” separate from the noun (Anceaux 1961, Silzer 1983, Price et al n.d.), shown in (4).

3. See, e.g., Donohue and Smith (1998) on *linguistic skeuomorphy*, the tendency towards cooption of non-contrastive pieces of morphosyntax to serve new linguistic functions, and so the predisposition of languages with multiple noncontrastive means of expressing the same semantic function to develop semantic contrasts within the one construction.

## (4) AMBAI

- |          |            |          |              |            |             |
|----------|------------|----------|--------------|------------|-------------|
| a. ne-hu | wiwing     | b. ne-mu | wiwing       | c. ne      | wiwing      |
| POSS-1SG | woman      | POSS-2SG | woman        | POSS(-3SG) | woman       |
|          | ‘my wife’  |          | ‘your wife’  |            | ‘his wife’  |
| d. ne-hu | wafo       | e. ne-mu | wafo         | f. ne      | wafo        |
| POSS-1SG | canoe      | POSS-2SG | canoe        | POSS(-3SG) | canoe       |
|          | ‘my canoe’ |          | ‘your canoe’ |            | ‘his canoe’ |

A small number of nouns are directly suffixed. The nouns that allow for this direct possession are all nouns that would be expected to appear in “inalienable” relationships: body parts and kin terms (though not all nouns that could be described with these terms) will show the direct possession strategy. Note that with ‘father’, for instance, the first person singular (and non-singular) possessor must be coded with an indirect strategy, while second and third person singular possessors use direct suffixal marking, as is found with most body parts.<sup>4</sup>

## (5) AMBAI

- |                    |                |                        |
|--------------------|----------------|------------------------|
| a. awe-hu          | b. awe-mu      | c. awe-ng              |
| leg-1SG            | leg-2SG        | leg-3SG                |
| ‘my leg’           | ‘your leg’     | ‘his/her leg’          |
| d. ne-hu dai       | e. tama-mu(ai) | f. tama-na (~ tama-ng) |
| POSS-1SG my.father | father-2SG     | father-3SG             |
| ‘my father’        | ‘your father’  | ‘his/her father’       |

The development of possessive constructions in the Eastern Malayo-Polynesian (EMP) languages is extensively discussed in van den Berg (n.d.). West of New Guinea we find occasional appearances of multiple possessive classifiers (in addition to direct possessive constructions). In Selaru (Coward 1990) and Sawai (cited in Laidig 1993:316), for instance, we can see the direct possession strategy used for inalienable relations, shown in (6a) and (7a), and also two different indirect possessive classifiers, one general classifier and one classifier that exists only for edible possession, which take suffixal possessive agreement. While the etymologies of the Selaru possessive classifiers *wasi* and *hina* are not clear, the edible classifier in Sawai, *ana-*, is plausibly related to the Oceanic \*ka- (via their common ancestor \*kaən), and the general classifier *ani-* is an irregular, though not implausible, reflex of \*na-.

## (6) SELARU

- |                   |                        |                       |
|-------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| a. iblu-mw-ke     | b. wasi-mw             | hahy-desy-ke          |
| skin-2SG-ART      | GENERAL-2SG            | pig-that-ART          |
| ‘your skin’       | ‘your pig there’       | ~ ‘that pig of yours’ |
| c. hina-mw        | hahy-desy-ke           |                       |
| EDIBLE-2SG        | pig-that-ART           |                       |
| ‘your pork there’ | ~ ‘that pork of yours’ |                       |

4. Ambai additionally shows prefixal possession with a restricted number of nouns. The alternation in (5f) displays the neutralization of nasals as velar in word-final position.

- (7) SAWAI
- |                        |             |       |
|------------------------|-------------|-------|
| a. a-fa-og             | b. ani-k    | um    |
| 1SG-hand-1SG.INAL.POSS | GENERAL-1SG | house |
| ‘my hand’              | ‘my house’  |       |
| c. ana-k               | yof         |       |
| EDIBLE-1SG             | sago        |       |
| ‘my sago’              |             |       |

Laidig (1993) presents a fascinating range of data on possession in Larike and other languages of Maluku, where we find evidence of the fossilized appearance of a possessive stem \*nV in the independent possessive pronouns of many Austronesian languages of the region. Example (8) shows the functors that emerge from internal reconstruction of the alienable possessive pronouns in the languages discussed in Laidig (1993), where forms apparently cognate with \*nV abound.

- (8) Buru \*na-, Kola \*-na-, West Tarangan \*-na-, Roma \*(a)ni-, Kisar \*-ni-, Yamdena \*ni-, (Fordata ?\*nu-, Laha ?\*nu-, the Fordata and Laha forms appear in the 1SG only)

Alienable/inalienable contrasts in eastern Indonesia are in some cases (e.g., Paulohi) coded by the contrast between prefixal and suffixal possessive marking, and in other cases through the contrast between direct and indirect possession. These contrasts are not characteristic of all of the languages of the region (see, amongst others, Van Klinken 1999:145), indicating that, as Grimes and later Ross suggested, the contrast is not an innovation in these Austronesian languages, but an erratic diffusion. We argue that the appearance of the cross-linguistically unusual indirect possessive construction, like the alienable/inalienable contrast, is the result of contact.

**5. INDIRECT POSSESSION.** West of New Guinea, Papuan languages are currently found in both North Halmahera and in the Timor region, and historically they are attested further west (Donohue 2007a). The languages of North Halmahera do not have contrastive possessive constructions, but those of southern Indonesia and East Timor do.

In some southern Papuan languages, such as Kolana and Teiwa (from eastern Alor and eastern Pantar, respectively), there is only a single possessive construction.<sup>5</sup> The same set of prefixes can be used for the kinds of semantic relations that could be classified as either ‘alienable’ or ‘inalienable’, as can be seen in (9) and (10).<sup>6</sup>

- (9) KOLANA
- |            |            |
|------------|------------|
| a. n-ken   | b. n-ol    |
| 1SG-cloth  | 1SG-child  |
| ‘my cloth’ | ‘my child’ |

5. Although there is no difference in Teiwa in the morphological marking of possession based on an alienable/inalienable distinction, possessive prefixes are obligatory on semantically inalienable possessed items (e.g., body parts, etc.), but not on semantically alienable ones. There is, thus, a contrast between obligatory and optionally possessed nouns.

6. Data on Kolana comes from fieldnotes collected by Donohue; data on Bunaq comes from Schapper (n.d.). The sources for other languages are cited as they appear.

- (10) TEIWA (Klamer and Kratochvíl 2006)
- |             |           |
|-------------|-----------|
| a. na-qavif | b. na-fat |
| 1SG-goat    | 1SG-foot  |
| 'my goat'   | 'my foot' |

More commonly, the Papuan languages of the Timor-Alor-Pantar region mark a distinction between alienable and inalienable possession. The semantic contrast is in some cases marked with different affixes, such as is shown for Abui in (11), but more often with an independent possessive classifier serving to mark alienable possession, as in the Bunaq, Blagar, and Klon examples in (12)–(14). Unifying these different constructions is the form of the alienable possessive morpheme, which reflects \*-e, whether free or frozen into the paradigm of pronominal prefixes.

- (11) ABUI (Kratochvíl 2007)
- |            |           |
|------------|-----------|
| a. ne-fála | b. na-min |
| 1SG-house  | 1SG-nose  |
| 'my house' | 'my nose' |

- (12) BUNAQ<sup>7</sup>
- |          |     |             |
|----------|-----|-------------|
| a. ni-e  | zap | b. n-up     |
| 1-POSS   | dog | 1-tongue    |
| 'my dog' |     | 'my tongue' |

- (13) BLAGAR (Steinhauer 1977, Steinhauer 1991)
- |            |       |          |
|------------|-------|----------|
| a. n-e     | jar   | b. n-ia  |
| 1SG-POSS   | water | 1SG-leg  |
| 'my water' |       | 'my leg' |

- (14) KLON (Baird forthcoming)
- |           |       |               |
|-----------|-------|---------------|
| a. n-e    | bokor | b. n-ad       |
| 1SG-POSS  |       | bowl1SG-mouth |
| 'my bowl' |       | 'my mouth'    |

Woisika has a contrast between tense and lax vowels (Stokhof 1979); in possession, we can see that the lax mid front vowel *é* is used in the marking of inalienable possession, the tense one *e* for alienable.

- (15) WOISIKA (Stokhof 1979, Kamengmai and Stokhof 1978)
- |            |           |
|------------|-----------|
| a. ne-kine | b. nê-taŋ |
| 1SG-bow    | 1SG-hand  |
| 'my bow'   | 'my hand' |

Adang (Haan 2001) shows direct possession with some inalienable relationships (with the vowel *ε* and separate possessive classifiers. These classifiers can appear with inherently possessed nouns to indicate contrast; unlike the normal genitive classifier, that has the form -*o*, the *e* set may function pronominally, as in (16b) (compare with [12a]).

- (16) ADANG (Haan 2001:164–65)
- |   |         |     |            |
|---|---------|-----|------------|
| a. N-e  | nε-ʔfai | ʔε  | maru dai.  |
| 1SG-CONTR.GEN   | 1SG-eye | NEG | blind EVID |
| 'My eyes (e.g., as contrast to yours) are not blind yet.' |         |     |            |

7. While *n-* is the productive first person prefix in Bunaq, there is evidence that *ni-* was historically prior. This CV form of the prefix is irregularly preserved in the possessive classifier and on a handful of verbs (e.g., *ni-a* 'eat me').

- |        |     |               |         |     |         |
|--------|-----|---------------|---------|-----|---------|
| b. Sɛŋ | ho  | n-e.          | c. *Sɛŋ | ho  | n-ɔ.    |
| money  | DEF | 1SG-CONTR.GEN | money   | DEF | 1SG-GEN |
- ‘The money is mine.’

A contrast between direct (prefixal) possession for inalienable relationships, and a separate indirect construction for alienable relationships formed about the possessive classifier *e*, must be reconstructed for these languages (Donohue and Schapper 2007). The appearance of direct and indirect possession in these languages, just at the point where evidence of indirect possession begins to appear in Austronesian languages, is too fortuitous to be merely coincidence. A possible objection to the scenario so far presented is that the Papuan languages are so consistently prefixing, both with their direct possession construction and with their indirect possession construction (see [12]). The following section draws these disparate features together.

**6. THE LINK BETWEEN ALIENABILITY, PREFIXATION, AND INDIRECT POSSESSION.** The Papuan languages of eastern Indonesia and East Timor contrast alienable and inalienable possessive relationships, and the contrast reconstructs to a difference between direct prefixal agreement on the possessum for the inalienable relation, and direct prefixal agreement on an independent ‘alienable possession’ classifier for the alienable relation. Further, it is in exactly this area that alienable/inalienable contrasts, prefixal possession, and possessive classifiers appear for the first time in Austronesian languages (barring some early, and most likely independent, innovations: e.g., Adelaar 2005).

In addition to a number of other traits (Donohue 2007b, Schapper 2008, Donohue and Denham 2008), contact with the Papuan languages of the region motivated the acquisition of prefixal agreement. The independent development of distinct verbal agreement systems across this same region offers (near-)independent evidence that this morphosyntactic change was not an innovation, but a response to regional norms (in terms of, for instance, the order of numerals or genitives with respect to the noun they modify, the position of the object with respect to the verb, the appearance of gender systems, and the frequent use of serial verb constructions—Donohue 2005, 2007b, Schapper 2008). In terms of possession, the norms that were influencing pressure were threefold: phrasally marking the alienable/inalienable contrast; possessors preceding the possessum in the possessive construction; and possessive classifiers. The appearance of prefixal genitive marking in Austronesian languages, particularly of Central Maluku, presumably reflects stronger, or longer-lasting, Papuan pressure than elsewhere (see also fn. 2).

Genitive prefixes were not, however, a common development, but the same typological pressures prompted many languages to find another way to position the genitive agreement suffix before the possessum, in line with the prenominal position of independent possessors, through hosting on a prenominal classifier. This emulates the relative ordering of prefixation without requiring it. The process is similar to the discussion in, e.g., Harvey, Green, and Nordlinger (2006). It is similarly analogous to many adaptations of word order in environments involving language shift, such as the extensive use of clefting in Irish English, in which the verb-initial order of Irish is reflected, or (to illustrate the reverse case) the high proportion of sentences with fronted objects in Papuan Malay, a

canonically SVO language spoken by speakers largely from SOV language backgrounds in New Guinea. Further, the development of genitive prefixes is, in addition to being an imitation of prefixal possessive marking, also an imperfect copy of the prenominal position of the possessive classifier borrowed from the Papuans, a more robust feature that now characterizes almost all of the Austronesian languages of the Pacific.<sup>8</sup> As such, even in the vast majority of Austronesian languages that did not develop possessive prefixation, the genitive agreement is able to appear prenominally. The acquisition of possessive classifiers in Austronesian languages can be seen as an indirect borrowing from Papuan languages, in the nature of a morphological calque, but they also represent a response to the pressure to develop prenominal possession and prefixal inflection. Prefixal inflection has been most obviously successful in the verbal agreement systems that characterize so many eastern Austronesian languages, probably reflecting the more “complete” status of heads that verbs enjoy. This scenario also accords with the observed absence of possessive classifiers (or their traces in independent possessive pronouns) in the languages of Central Maluku. If both prefixation and (suffixation on) prenominal classifiers are responses to an areal tendency towards prenominal possession, then accommodation to that tendency will have already been satisfied by the development of genitive prefixation. If these are two unconnected processes, then the absence of possessive classification in Central Maluku remains unexplained.

Without this link we are left without an explanation for the absence of possessive classifiers in this area, where they are found in both North and South Maluku.

Table 1 contrasts the conservative Austronesian system of possession, with the genitive affix appearing suffixally on the noun, with developments that appear subsequent to contact with Papuan languages. The Central Maluku system maintains the suffixal possession construction for inalienable possession, but combines this with prefixal possession acquired directly (but not formally) from their Papuan substrate. The system of indirect possession is another result of contact, but the complementary distribution of this construction with prefixal possession in Central Maluku suggests that the same pressure that led to the development of prefixation in some languages led to the acquisition of indirect possession in others.

**TABLE 1. LEFTWARD MIGRATION OF GENITIVE AGREEMENT**

Conservative Austronesian (direct) system			N	-Gen	(AL/INAL)
Central Maluku system			N	-Gen	(INAL)
		Gen-	N		(AL)
EMP Austronesian system (also erratically in Maluku)			N	-Gen	(INAL)
	Classifier	Gen-	N		(AL)
East Indonesian <b>Papuan</b> system		Gen-	Classifier	N	(AL)
		Gen-	N		(AL)

The development of indirect possession strategies, and the development of alienable/inalienable contrasts, are related. When the Austronesian languages became enmeshed in an area in which Papuan peoples not only survived, but probably dominated in many

8. It must be borne in mind that head-initial structure in NPs was not a feature of conservative Austronesian languages, but rather an innovation in the south (Donohue 2007b).

spheres of society for a long period (such as was found in the islands immediately west of New Guinea), they encountered prefixal agreement patterns and languages with possessive classification. Both of these traits were distributed across much of northern Sahul, probably reflecting a very ancient linguistic area. The acquisition of these traits by the Austronesians was part of the drift to a more ambiguous typological profile, allowing for both head-initial and head-final elements. This ambiguity is almost expected of languages with a clausal SVO order, such as has become modal in most southern Austronesian languages (Donohue 2005, 2007b).<sup>9</sup>

**7. CONCLUSION.** The direct vs. indirect opposition in possessive constructions that is so characteristic of Oceanic languages began in eastern Indonesia, and has its origins in contact with the Papuan languages with which Austronesian speakers came into contact. We do not claim that the *forms* found in Oceanic are necessarily inherited from an earlier stage of Austronesian (though the correspondences reflecting \*nV appear robust, and the Sawai alienable possessive classifier is similarly promising); rather, the *construction* itself developed as a result of influence on Malayo-Polynesian languages prior to the formation of Proto-Oceanic, but the forms were lexified more than once in different languages, reflecting diffusion, rather than innovation.

The existence of the alienable/inalienable contrast, or of indirect possession without cognate morphology, has no subgrouping value for Austronesian languages of Indonesia, though the reconstruction of the forms used to encode these contrasts can prove to be useful. By the period of Proto-Oceanic (at the latest; more probably Proto-Eastern Malayo-Polynesian) an alienable/inalienable contrast was a fully grammaticalized part of the grammar. While the forms found in the indirect possession construction appear to have continued to grammaticalize, the existence of the system itself can be traced back to contact with Papuan languages west of New Guinea.

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9. Palmer and Brown (2007) argue that the Oceanic possessive classifiers are in fact syntactic heads; this does not change the fact that the affix marking the possessor precedes the noun in the construction. This is similar to the contradictions associated with headedness in the development of prenominal modification discussed in Donohue (2007b).

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