CATALAN POSSESSIVE PRONOUNS: THE AVOID PRONOUN PRINCIPLE REVISITED*

Two types of pronominal elements may appear in Catalan nominal constructions: the possessive pronoun and the strong pronoun. These elements differ in distribution, syntactic behavior and denotative properties. This paper proposes that the alternation between possessive and strong pronouns in nominals is parallel to the alternation between pro and strong pronouns in clausal structures. The possessive in nominals and in clauses instantiate the Avoid Pronoun Principle, whose application affects feature specification in the referential grid of pronominal elements, and not the phonological content of pronouns, as has traditionally been assumed.

0. INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the distribution and properties of possessive pronouns in Catalan, a language of the Romance family. Two types of pronominal elements can appear in Romance nominals: the possessive, exemplified in (1), and the so-called ‘strong pronoun’, in (2):

(1) Els seus llibres
    the his/her/their books
    His/her/their books

(2) Els llibres d’ella
    the books of she
    Her books

Possessive pronominalization is only possible for arguments that are assigned genitive case: Possessor, Agent, Experiencer, and Theme. A strong pronoun can pronominalize any type of argument, genitive or oblique. A possessive argument is in prenominal position, whereas a strong pronoun

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1 In Catalan, postnominal possessives, as in (i), do not behave like arguments, but rather like pseudo-adjectives in some respects. Postnominal possessives will not be discussed in this paper:

(i) El xiulet seu
    the whistle of his/her/its/their
    his/her/its/their whistle
must appear postnominally. The latter behaves like nonpronominal arguments, which cannot appear to the left of the N head:

(3) *Els d'ella llibres
   the of she books

(4)a. Els llibres d'en Guillem
    the books of Guillem
    Guillem's books

b. *Els d'en Guillem llibres
    the of Guillem books

A strong pronoun agrees with its intended referent in person, gender, and number, as in (5a) below, while the possessive agrees with the N head. Morphological agreement between the possessive and the nominal head causes lack of grammatical agreement in gender and number between the possessive and its intended referent, as is shown in (5b): 2

(5)a. Quan les fotografies d'ell es van publicar,
    when the pictures of he were published,
    el president es va empipar.
    the president got mad

b. Quan les seves fotografies es van publicar,
    when the his pictures were published,
    el president es va empipar.
    the president got mad

When his pictures were published, the president got mad.

Possessives and strong pronouns also differ with respect to several syntactic and denotative properties, as we will see. In this paper, I will be concerned with answering the following questions:

(i) Why should Catalan nominals (and Romance nominals in general) have two types of phonologically realized pronominal arguments, namely, the possessive and the strong pronoun?

(ii) Why does each of them occupy a different structural position in the Determiner Phrase (henceforth DP)?

2 I will use MASC or FEM, SING or PLUR to gloss the morphemes for gender and number, respectively. Person morphemes will be glossed in Roman numerals: I, II or III.