

**The ‘animal’ possessive morpheme in Chiquitano and Boróro:  
common inheritance or borrowing?**

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Many languages present a subset of nouns which cannot be directly possessed, requiring instead an indirect possessive construction involving generic nouns. Such generic ‘possessive nouns’ (Bickel & Nichols 2011) are rather common in lowland South American languages, being variously referred to as ‘markers of alienable possession’ (Rodrigues 1992), ‘relational generic nouns’ (Queixalós 2005), ‘alienators’ (Ribeiro 2002), or ‘possessive classifiers’ (Aikhenvald 2000). Their widespread distribution seems to be, in some cases, the result of areal influence, while in other cases it may be due to common genetic inheritance. The former situation is illustrated by the ‘animal’ possessive constructions in Chaco languages, which employ non-cognate morphemes in identical syntactic arrangements (Campbell 2003). The latter situation is illustrated by the generic possessive noun \**j-ō* in Jê, which has likely cognates in several other families within the Macro-Jê stock (Rodrigues 1992, Ribeiro 2002, 2009).

Some cases, however, are not as clear-cut, as they may involve morphemes which, although having ultimately the same origin, may occur in different languages not as an instance of common genetic inheritance, but as a result of borrowing. This paper discusses the case of the possessive noun for ‘animals’ in Chiquitano and in the Boróro family (both of which have been included in the Macro-Jê stock; Greenberg 1987, Adelaar 2008), investigating whether their shared occurrence is a result of language contact or common genetic inheritance. Besides occurring in Boróro proper (*ago* ~ *ako*), the ‘animal’ possessive morpheme was also documented for Umutína (*aw*), a now-extinct member of the Boróro family; therefore, it can likely be reconstructed for Proto-Boróro. The phonological, semantic, and grammatical similarities between the Boróro morpheme and its Chiquitano counterpart, *abu* (transcribed as *au* in colonial sources; Adam & Henry 1880), are straightforward (1) (Crowell 1977:178, Telles 2007:136, Galeote Tormo 1993:125).

- (1) a. Boróro *i-n-ago kogariga* ‘my chicken’  
b. Umutína *i-n-aw arikabo* ‘my dog’  
c. Chiquitano *n-i-y-abu tamocorr* ‘my dog’

Considering that the relationship between Chiquitano and the other families within Macro-Jê is far from obvious, the identification of such an additional cognate would in principle be a welcome piece of evidence corroborating the purported genetic relationship. However, morphological and word-order considerations, especially when colonial Chiquitano data are taken into consideration, seem to suggest the possibility of borrowing, rather than common inheritance. Otukê, an extinct Boróro

language (Créqui-Monfort & Rivet 1912, 1913), was one of the several languages involved in what seems to have been a situation of intense language contact in the Chiquitos missions, where Chiquitano was promoted as a lingua franca by Jesuit missionaries early on (Métraux 1942). If Chiquitano *abu* is indeed a loan, Otukê would be a likely source. No matter what the conclusion (borrowing? common inheritance? (unlikely) coincidence?) turns out to be (assuming a conclusion can be reached at all), the investigation provided in this paper should help shed light into the little-known past of Chiquitano and the Boróro language family.

## 2. Chiquitano as Macro-Jê

Chiquitano is included in the Macro-Jê stock by Greenberg (1987), but not by Rodrigues (1999). However, recent studies suggest that Chiquitano should indeed be included in the stock. Adelaar (2008), in particular, uncovers a number of lexical correspondences in basic vocabulary, which, combined with the striking similarities in person marking pointed out by Greenberg, provide strong corroboration for the inclusion of Chiquitano in the Macro-Jê stock (certainly stronger than what has been suggested for Guató, for instance). In a recent paper (Ribeiro 2011), I further suggest that ‘linking consonants’ in Chiquitano are likely cognates of similar morphemes in other Macro-Jê languages, traditionally referred to as “relational prefixes”:

(2) **Chiquitano**

- |                                |                                  |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| a. <i>i-s-oo</i><br>‘my tooth’ | b. <i>i-ñ-utu</i><br>‘my tongue’ |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|

(3) **Apinajé**

- |                                  |                                   |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| a. <i>it-tf-wa</i><br>‘my tooth’ | b. <i>i-p-õ?to</i><br>‘my tongue’ |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|

## 3. Word order considerations

Considering that the phonological correspondences between Chiquitano and other Macro-Jê languages tend to be far from obvious, the striking superficial similarities between the ‘animal’ possessive noun in Chiquitano and Boróro must be seen with caution. As a rule of thumb for those investigating long-range genetic relationships, one must bear in mind that obvious similarities may indicate borrowing, rather than common inheritance.

Furthermore, considerations of word-order may provide a possibly stronger piece of evidence for the borrowing hypothesis. I refer here to the different behaviors displayed by *au* ‘animal’ and the other generic possessive noun in (Colonial) Chiquitano, *eenaxi* ‘haberes domésticos’, at least in one passage of Adam & Henry (1880:8), which seems to suggest that they originally would occur in different positions (4).<sup>1</sup>

- (4) a. *y-au tamocos* ‘my dog’  
b. *purubis ñ-**eenaxi*** ‘my cotton’

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<sup>1</sup> That needs to be further investigated, as the different behaviors may be due to (i) transcription mistakes or (ii) positional optionality.

For modern Chiquitano, Galeote Tormo provides *esa* as the form for the generic possessive noun, and its position is the same as with the ‘animal’ possessor in (colonial and contemporary) Chiquitano. Apparently, *esa* (transcribed by the Jesuits as *eza*) already occurred in Jesuit Chiquitano, as in the following passage of a song archived at the Archivo Musical de Chiquitos, transcribed by Galeote Tormo (1993:285): *n-a-eza ape* ‘your sky’. It is necessary, however, to determine how old such songs are (are they contemporary with the data given by Adam & Henry 1880?), whether they represent different dialects, etc. [*Eza* ~ *esa* is likely the same morpheme which occurs in *eza-ca-s* ‘dominio, posesión’ (Adam & Henry 1880:98).]

Interestingly enough, another generic possessive noun in Chiquitano, *sue* ‘plant’ (Galeote Tormo op. cit, apud Fabre 2007:72), also seems to occur in a different position (5), when compared to the ‘animal’ possessive noun. The word order, in this case, is the same order found in similar constructions in Arawák languages such as Baniwa (6):

- (5) **Chiquitano**  
*tutai i-sue*  
 planta 1-cl.pos.gen.planta  
 ‘mi tutaí (planta)’
- (6) **Baniwa**  
 tʃinu nu-ite  
 dog 1sg-cl.animate  
 ‘my dog’

One possibility, to be further investigated upon a careful examination of colonial sources on Chiquitano, is that the order in (4b) and (5) is the original one, while the one in (1c) would have been introduced by borrowing (and then spread, by analogy, to native constructions such as the ones involving the generic possessive noun *esa* in contemporary Chiquitano).

#### 4. Ethnohistorical (and other) considerations

Although ‘possessive classifiers’ are generally described as (semi-)grammatical morphemes, they are ultimately nouns and, as such, may be prone to borrowing (as a pattern, as illustrated by the Chaco case; as lexical items; or ‘wholesale’, as in our hypothetical Chiquitano-Boróro scenario). That may be particularly the case with possessive classifiers such as the ones discussed in this paper, which occur with nouns referring to items (pets and husbandry) which are often objects of trade.<sup>2</sup> The possibility that Chiquitano borrowed the ‘animal’ possessive noun from Otukê poses an interesting question on the nature of the cultural relationship between speakers of both languages. Would that reflect economic specialization of some sort?<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> That is also the case with other semi-grammaticalized morphemes such as measure terms.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, although the Karajá are the traditional inhabitants of the Araguaia region, some words for local fauna are of Tapirapé origin, since the Tapirapé were traditional providers of macaws (whose feathers have important commercial value) to the Karajá.

## 5. To-do list

As the preceding notes demonstrate, at this stage of the research I have a number of exciting hypotheses to investigate, rather than conclusive answers. Additional lines of inquiry include:

- how much of a ‘closed category’ are possessive nouns? would there be other nouns playing similar functions?
- how much of such differences (between, for example, *eenaxi* and *eza*) are of a dialectal, instead of historical, nature?
- would *eenaxi* contain a nasalized form of *eza*?
- etc.
- ☺ Comments and suggestions are, of course, very much welcome!

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