Variation in the subject position requires both relative clause-external and internal analyses

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1. Introduction.

Genitive subject relative clauses (GSRCs) in Central Asian Turkic and Mongolic languages present a locality puzzle: phi-agreement appears not on the predicate inside the relative clause (RC), but on the modified noun outside of it. This pattern of apparently non-local agreement distinguishes these GSRCs from their well-studied Turkish counterparts and has led to multiple syntactic analyses (e.g., Hale 2002; Kornfilt 2008ab, 2015; Baker & Vinokurova 2010; Csató and Uchturpani 2010; Asarina 2011; Miyagawa 2011; Gribanova 2018; Laszakovits 2019; O'Reilly-Brown 2024; Ótott-Kovács 2021,2023, 2024; Major, Thoms, & Eziz 2024). Previous work on these GSRCs has largely focused on individual languages or a small set of similar languages. As a result, cross-linguistic variation in GSRCs has not been observed and investigated. Through a comparative study of Kazakh (Central Asian Turkic) and Khalkha Mongolian (Mongolic), this paper argues that the two languages' superficially similar GSRCs in fact have distinct underlying syntax. We demonstrate through three arguments that the genitive phrase in GSRCs is external to the RC in Kazakh but internal to the RC in Khalkha. We attribute this structural variation to the parametric properties of the D head, revealing a finer-grained typology of GSRCs than previously understood.

2. Issues surrounding GSRCs with agreement on the head.

In a subset of Turkic and Mongolic languages, relative clauses (RCs) are formed through two strategies. The first, which we term nominative subject RCs (NSRCs), involves a nominative subject with no subject phi-agreement:

(1) [Aiʃa-Ø ___ᵢ okɯ-gan] kitapi[1]   [Kazakh]
    [Aisha-NOM read-PRF] book
    'The book [that Aisha read]'

The second, genitive subject RCs (GSRCs), is characterized by genitive case marking on the (putative) subject of the RC and the presence of phi-agreement on the head of the RC:

(2) [Aiʃa-nɯŋ ___ᵢ okɯ-gan] kitabi-ɯ   [Kazakh]
    [Aisha-GEN read-PRF] book-POSS.3
    'The book [that Aisha read]'

The phi-agreement appearing on the RC predicate is ungrammatical, in contrast to RCs in languages like Turkish.

(3) * [Aiʃa-nɯŋ ___ᵢ okɯ-gan-ɯ] kitapi   [Kazakh]
     [Aisha-GEN read-PRF-POSS.3] book

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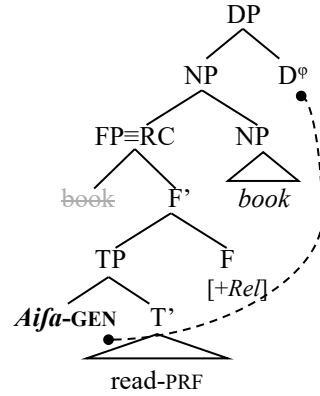[1] The following glosses and abbreviations are used throughout the paper: 1/2/3=first/second/third person; CVB=converb; EP=epenthetic material without semantic content; GEN=genitive; LOC=locative; NOM=nominative, POSS=possessive; PRF=perfect, PRSP=prospective, PST=past tense, PTCP=participle, SG=singular, TOP=topic marker.

A central issue in the study of these constructions is the licensing of the genitive phrase[2] in GSRCs: the agreement morphology appears on the modified noun phrase, in a seemingly non-local relationship with the RC subject it agrees with.

(4)

Non-local Agree?

[Aiʃa-**nuɯŋ** __ᵢ oku-gan] kitabi-**ɯ**   [Kazakh]
[Aisha-GEN   read-PRF] book-POSS.3

Simplifying somewhat, there are at least two approaches to this issue. One approach posits that the genitive subject is licensed within the RC itself and resolves the apparent non-local dependency by proposing a smaller syntactic domain for the RC. Proponents of this view (e.g., Kornfilt 2008ab, 2009, 2015; Miyagawa 2011) argue that the RC in these languages has a reduced structure, such as an AspP (e.g., Hale 2002) rather than a full CP phase. The evidence for this reduced structure is the RC predicate's inability to host finite tense or agreement morphology. In the absence of a CP phase, the D of the head noun can probe into the RC, establish an agreement relation with the subject, and license its genitive case. In (5), we tentatively represent such a reduced structure as FP.
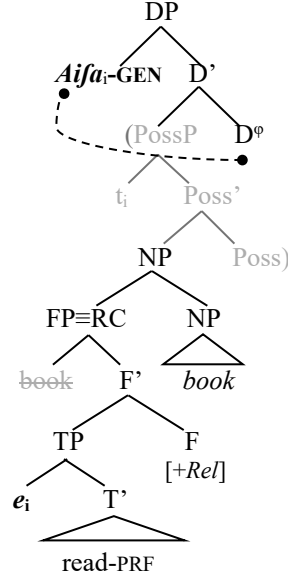
(5) RC-internal GEN analysis

An alternative approach posits that the genitive phrase is located in an RC-external position. One of the proposals along this line suggest that the genitive phrase is base-generated outside the RC (e.g., Dékány and Georgieva 2021; Laszakovits 2019; O'Reilly-Brown 2024; Ótott-Kovács 2021, 2023, 2024; Pleshak 2022; cf. Hale 2002, Major, Thoms, & Eziz 2024). Under this analysis, the locality issue of genitive case licensing is resolved by directly base-generating the genitive phrase in an RC-external position local to D, without requiring D to probe into the RC.

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[2] In GSRCs, the genitive case often marks the DP that appears to be the subject of the RC. However, as we demonstrate in the upcoming sections, the genitive-marked phrase is not always base-generated in the RC subject position across languages. To avoid ambiguity, we use the term "genitive phrase" instead of "genitive subject" when making such a distinction is relevant and necessary.

(6) RC-external GEN analysis

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                        DP
                   ╱         ╲
            Aifaᵢ-GEN        D'
              •            ╱    ╲
              ┊       (PossP     Dᵠ
              ┊       ╱    ╲       •
              ┊     tᵢ    Poss'
              ┊          ╱    ╲
                       NP     Poss)
                    ╱     ╲
               FP≡RC       NP
              ╱    ╲       │
          book     F'    book
                 ╱    ╲
               TP      F
              ╱  ╲   [+Rel]
            eᵢ    T'
                ╱────╲
              read-PRF
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While both approaches account for genitive case licensing and non-local agreement, distinguishing between them empirically has proven challenging. This paper addresses this challenge by presenting a comparative analysis of GSRCs in Kazakh (Turkic) and Khalkha Mongolian (Mongolic). We provide evidence that, despite superficial similarities, GSRCs in these two languages have fundamentally different underlying structures. We demonstrate that the genitive phrase in Kazakh is external to the RC, whereas the genitive phrase in Khalkha is licensed within the RC. We argue that this cross-linguistic variation stems from the properties of the D head in each language. The differing feature sets of D in Kazakh and Khalkha determine whether it can license a genitive phrase externally or must probe into the RC. Our results reveal a finer-grained syntactic variation in GSRCs than previously understood, while also establishing the initial diagnostics in a methodology that distinguishes competing theories of GSRCs, a project to be developed more comprehensively in future work.

3. Cross-linguistic differences in GSRC syntax.

We demonstrate the structural distinction between GSRCs in Kazakh and Khalkha using three diagnostics. First, the genitive phrase and the RC predicate can be separated by an intervening modifier in Kazakh, but not in Khalkha. Second, the genitive phrase may not co-occur with a possessor in Kazakh, whereas it can in Khalkha. Third, the Kazakh genitive phrase allows for a possessor interpretation, while this reading is unavailable in Khalkha. In each case, the results indicate an RC-external position for the Kazakh genitive phrase and an RC-internal position for the Khalkha counterpart.

3.1 Intervening modifiers

The first diagnostic tests whether a modifier of the RC's head noun can appear between the genitive phrase and the RC predicate. As summarized in (7), Kazakh permits this word order whereas Khalkha disallows it. The patterns are discussed with data below.

(7) a. Kazakh: ✓ [DP-GEN] [**modifier (of the modified DP)**] [RC-predicate] [modified-DP]
    b. Khalkha: ✗ [DP-GEN] [**modifier (of the modified DP)**] [RC-predicate] [modified-DP]

3.1.1 Kazakh allows intervening modifiers

The suffix *-GI* derives adjectives in Kazakh, as in (). Notice that *-GI* modifiers come between the possessor (*meniŋ* 'I-gen') and the possessee (*ʒer-im* 'place-poss.1sg'). That is, the most natural word order in the noun phrase is: possessor - adjectival modifier (including *-GI* phrases) - possessee. *-GI*-marked phrases cannot modify verbal predicates (see Ótott-Kovács 2024, ex. (32)).

(8) Men-iŋ Vengrija-da-**gɯ** ʒer-im   alɯs-ta.
    I-GEN   Hungary-LOC-GI place-POSS.1SG far-LOC
    'My place, located in Hungary, is far.' (Ótott-Kovács 2024, ex. (35b))

In a GSRC (9), the *-GI*-marked modifier of the RC head noun (*ʒer* 'place' in the example below) can follow the genitive phrase while preceding the RC predicate.

(9) <u>Men-iŋ</u> Vengrija-da-**gɯ** <u>erteŋ   bar-atɯn</u> ʒer-im   alɯs-ta.
    I-GEN   Hungary-LOC-GI tomorrow go-PRSP   place-POSS.1SG far-LOC
    'The place, located in Hungary, where I am going tomorrow is far.' (Ótott-Kovács 2024, ex. (34))

This contrasts sharply with NSRCs (10), where the *-GI* phrase cannot intervene between the nominative RC subject and the RC predicate. Naturally, the *-GI*-marked adjective can come between the RC (predicate) and the modified noun.

(10) [RC <u>Men</u>   (* Vengrija-da-**gɯ**) <u>erteŋ   bar-atɯn</u>] (Vengrija-da-**gɯ**) ʒer   alɯs-ta.
     [I-NOM (* Hungary-LOC-GI) tomorrow go-PRSP] (Hungary-LOC-GI) place far-LOC
     'The place, located in Hungary, where I am going tomorrow is far.' (Ótott-Kovács 2024, fn. 25, modified)

The word order patterns suggest that the genitive-marked phrase is not inside the RC, but rather occupies the RC-external possessor position, shown in (11).

(11) <u>Men-iŋ</u> Vengrija-da-**gɯ** [RC <u>erteŋ bar-atɯn</u>] ʒer-im alɯs-ta.

3.1.2 Khalkha disallows intervening modifiers

Khalkha displays the opposite pattern from Kazakh, consistent with the RC-internal analysis. The diagnostic here utilizes nominal modifiers with the locative particle *dakhi*. In a regular possessive DP construction, the *dakhi* phrases can appear either between the possessor and the modified possessee, or linearly before the possessor, as in (12).

(12) (tasalgaan dakhi) Tuyaa-g-iin   (tasalgaan dakhi) sandal (ni)
     (indoor   dakhi) Tuya-EP-GEN (indoor   dakhi) chair POSS.3
     'Tuya's indoor chair'

Just as in Kazakh, modifiers of the RC head noun cannot intervene in an NSRC. As illustrated in (13), the *dakhi* phrase cannot appear between the nominative subject and the RC predicate.

(13) * [RC Tuya-Ø   **tasalgaan dakhi** khudalda.j aw-san   ] sandal
       [Tuya-NOM **indoor   dakhi** trade.CVB buy-PST.PTCP] chair
         Intended: 'The indoor chair, which Tuya bought.'

However, in direct contrast to Kazakh GSRCs, the prohibition against intervening modifiers extends to GSRCs in Khalkha. A *dakhi* modifier cannot intervene between the genitive-marked phrase and the RC predicate.

(14) * [$_{RC}$ Tuya-g-iin **tasalgaan dakhi** khudalda.j aw-san   ] sandal (ni)
       [Tuya-EP-GEN **indoor**   **dakhi** trade.CVB buy-PST.PTCP] chair   (POSS.3)
          Intended: 'The indoor chair, which Tuya bought.'

The word order patterns in Khalkha suggest that the genitive subject is located inside the GSRC in Khalkha.

(15) [$_{RC}$ <u>Tuya-g-iin</u> (*tasalgaan **dakhi**) <u>khudalda.j aw-san</u>] sandal (ni)

3.2 Co-occurring possessor and genitive subject

The second diagnostic exploits different constraints on the co-occurrence of possessors and genitive phrases in the two languages: Khalkha permits a GSRC to be further modified by a separate genitive possessor, a construction that is ungrammatical in Kazakh. The contrast is schematized below.

(16) a. Kazakh: ✗ [**DP(possessor)-GEN**] [**DP(RC subject)-GEN**] [RC-predicate] [modified DP]
      b. Khalkha: ✓ [**DP(possessor)-GEN**] [**DP(RC subject)-GEN**] [RC-predicate] [modified DP]

3.2.1 Kazakh disallows co-occurring possessor and genitive phrase

Kazakh does not allow two genitive-marked possessors to be associated with the same possessed noun. This restriction is characteristic of most (if not all) Turkic languages. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is the so-called Stuttering Prohibition (Kornfilt 1986, and subsequent), which prohibits the co-occurrence of morphemes of the same category within the domain of M-words in Turkic languages (Tat and Kornfilt 2018:17, ex. (31)). Since two possessors would each require a corresponding possessive agreement marker on the possessee, the structure would be ruled out under the Stuttering Prohibition. An example is given in (17), where the co-occurrence of the two agreement morphemes (*kitab-ɯ-sɯ*) renders the construction ill-formed.

(17) * Ajʃa-nuɯŋ Abaj-dɯŋ kitab-ɯ-(sɯ)
        Aisha-GEN Abai-GEN book-POSS.3-(POSS.3)
        Intended: 'Aisha's book of Abai's' (Abai is a Kazakh poet)

This restriction is informative when applied to RCs in Kazakh. As expected, an NSRC, whose subject is not genitive, can freely co-occur with a possessor. But crucially, GSRCs cannot: when the putative RC "subject" is genitive, adding a possessor is disallowed.

(18) a. Abaj-dɯŋ [**Ajʃa-Ø**   __$_i$ okɯ-gan] kitab$_i$-ɯ
         Abai-GEN [Aisha-NOM   read-PRSP] book-POSS.3
         'Abai's book that Aisha read'

     b. * Abaj-dɯŋ **Ajʃa-nuɯŋ** __$_i$ okɯ-gan   kitab$_i$-ɯ-(sɯ)
        Abai-GEN Aisha-GEN   read-PRSP book-POSS.3-(POSS.3)
        Intended 'Abai's book that Aisha read'

The ungrammaticality of (18b) is immediately explained if the GSRC's genitive phrase is in fact a possessor in Kazakh. Under our analysis, (18b) is illicit because it constitutes an attempt to stack two possessors, Abaj-dɯŋ and Ajʃa-nuɯŋ, on one possessee noun. This is predicted by the RC-external analysis.

3.2.2 Khalkha allows co-occurring possessor and genitive subject

In direct contrast, Khalkha allows a GSRC to co-occur with a possessor, indicating that there are at least two separate genitive case licensers – one for possessors, and the other for embedded subjects.

(19) Zaya-g-iin   [RC Dorj-iin   öčigdör   __i unš-san   ] nom (ni)
Zaya-EP-GEN [Dorj-GEN yesterday   read-PST.PTCP] book POSS.3
'Zaya's book that Dorj read'

(20) [RC Dorj-iin   öčigdör   __i unš-san   ] Zaya-g-iin   nom (ni)
[Dorj-GEN yesterday   read-PST.PTCP] Zaya-EP-GEN book POSS.3
'Zaya's book that Dorj read'

Independent evidence for two distinct genitive licensers comes from the distribution of first and second person pronouns in Khalkha. First and second person genitive pronouns in some possessive constructions may freely alternate between two forms. Using the first person singular pronoun as an example, it can appear as either *minii* or *manai* in the possessive DP (21):

(21) a. Minii bagš   b. Manai bagš[3]
    1.GEN teacher   1.GEN teacher
    'My teacher' (interpretation of *minii*: singular)   'My teacher' (interpretation of *manai*: singular)

Crucially, the free alternation observed in (22) disappears when the construction involves an RC construction. When functioning as the subject of the RC, only the form *minii* is grammatical.

(22) a. [RC Minii öčigdör uulz-san   ] bagš
    [1.GEN yesterday meet-PST.PTCP] teacher
       'The teacher [that I met yesterday]'
    b. * [RC Manai öčigdör   uulz-san   ] bagš
       [1.GEN   yesterday meet-PST.PTCP] teacher
      'The teacher [that I met yesterday]'

This restriction on pronoun form is unexpected if the genitive RC subject were simply a possessor in Khalkha. It is predicted, however, if the genitive case on RC subjects is licensed by a mechanism separate from that of genitive possessors. The distinct patterns between genitive subjects and possessors are expected if the Khalkha genitive subjects are RC-internal.

3.3 Semantic interpretation

The third diagnostic leverages semantic interpretation to determine the structural position of the genitive phrases. The RC-internal analysis predicts that the genitive phrase in a GSRC should not be interpreted as the possessor of the head noun. In contrast, an RC-external analysis in which the genitive phrase is base-generated outside the RC would allow for a possessor interpretation, since it is possible for the genitive phrase to occupy the possessor position (e.g., PossP). To test these predictions, we use RCs that modify relational noun possessees (e.g., *father*, *eye*). These are transitive nouns that require another DP to saturate their argument slot in the possessor position. That is, if the genitive phrase (i.e., the putative RC subject) is in the possessor position, it must be interpreted as the argument of the relational noun (for further discussion on relational nouns see e.g., Partee and Borschev 1998, 2003). If the genitive phrase is an RC-internal subject, no such interpretation is forced. The results from Kazakh and Khalkha align with the structural distinction established by the previous diagnostics: we find that

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[3] Strictly speaking, *manai* is the first person plural possessive pronoun, in contrast to the first person singular *minii*. However, *manai* is often used with reference to a singular possessor. See Tserenpil and Kullmann (2015: 104), Janhunen (2012: 136) for further information about this usage.

Kazakh patterns in accordance with an RC-external analysis, while Khalkha patterns with the RC-internal analysis.

3.3.1 Kazakh: obligatory possessor interpretation

In Kazakh, the genitive phrase in a GSRC is obligatorily interpreted as the possessor of a relational head noun, as predicted by the RC-external analysis. We first establish a baseline with an NSRC (23). In a context where the teacher, Saule, has spoken to multiple parents, an NSRC can modify the relational head noun *æke* 'father' without implying that the RC subject *Saule* is an argument (i.e., the possessor) of the relational noun. In (23), the 'father' is simply an individual with whom Saule spoke for a long time yesterday; the 'father' is not Saule's father.

(23) Saule is a teacher. She participated in a teacher-parent event yesterday, where she talked to several parents. We are talking about the parents.

[RC **Sæule-Ø**   keʃe   uzak sœjles-ken] æke   Ajnur-dɯŋ æke-si.
[Saule-NOM yesterday long chat-PRF   ] father Ainur-GEN father-POSS.3
'The father with whom Saule chatted for a long time yesterday is Ainur's father.'
                                    (Adapted from Ótott-Kovács 2021:17, ex. (25))

This contrasts sharply with GSRCs. In the same context, using a GSRC is not felicitous as the genitive-marked phrase, *Sæule-niŋ*, is interpreted as the relational noun's argument. As shown in (24), the only available interpretation of the sentence is that the *father* is Saule's father. This indicates that the genitive phrase is not located inside the RC in Kazakh, but rather in the RC-external possessor position.

(24) Saule is a teacher. She participated in a teacher-parent event yesterday, where she talked to several parents. We are talking about the parents.

 # Sæule-niŋ keʃe   uzak sœjles-ken æke-si   Ajnur-dɯŋ æke-si.
   Saule-GEN yesterday long chat-PRF   father-POSS.3 Ainur-GEN father-POSS.3
Intended (unavailable) reading: 'The father with whom Saule chatted for a long time yesterday is Ainur's father.'
Available reading: 'Saule's father, with whom Saule chatted for a long time yesterday, is Ainur's father.'
                                    (Adapted from Ótott-Kovács 2021:17, ex. (26))

3.3.2 Khalkha: no possessor interpretation

Khalkha provides a clear contrast. When an RC modifies a relational noun, the subject of the RC is never interpreted as the noun's possessor, regardless of whether its case is nominative or genitive. In a context parallel to the one used for Kazakh, an RC modifying *aaw* 'father' can have either a nominative or a genitive subject. In both cases, the interpretation remains the same: the father is an individual that Dulmaa talked to, and there is no implication that the father is Dulmaa's father.

(25) Dulmaa is a teacher. She participated in a teacher-parent event yesterday, where she talked to several parents. We are talking about the parents
[RC Dulmaa-Ø/-g-iin   öčigdör udaan kharilts-san] aaw   (ni)   bol Dorj-iin   aaw   (ni)
[Dulmaa-NOM/-EP-GEN yesterday long   chat-PST.PTCP] father POSS.3 TOP Dorj-GEN father (POSS.3)
'The father with whom Dulmaa chatted for a long time yesterday is Dorj's father.'
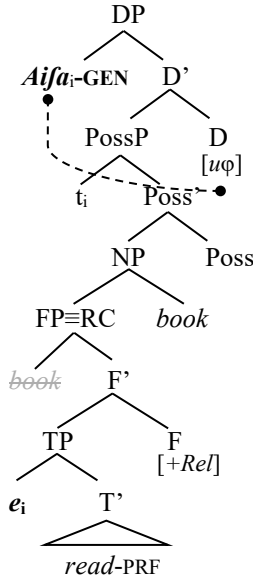
The fact that the genitive subject in Khalkha patterns with the nominative subject in the interpretation of (25) would be expected if the genitive subject is an argument internal to the RC.
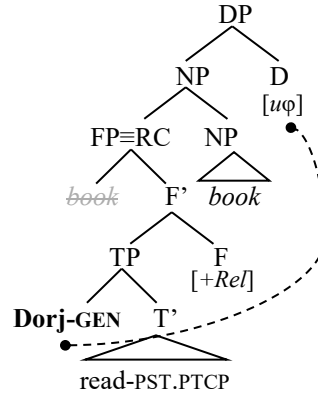
4. Analysis.

The diagnostics presented above reveal a fundamental structural distinction between superficially similar GSRCs in Kazakh and Khalkha. We argue that this variation stems from the featural specification of the D head in each language, which determines the possible licensing positions of the genitive phrase.

In Kazakh the genitive phrase is external to the RC. Building on standard analyses of Turkic possessive constructions (e.g., Kornfilt 1984, Tat 2013, Öztürk and Taylan 2016, inter alia), we propose that the genitive phrase in Kazakh occupies the same syntactic position as a possessor: it is base-generated in Spec PossP and subsequently moves to Spec DP. [4] In contrast, the Khalkha genitive subject is licensed within the RC. The D head probes through the structurally deficient RC and agrees with the subject in Spec TP.

(26) a. Kazakh: RC-external GEN   b. Khalkha: RC-internal GEN

We propose that this cross-linguistic variation is conditioned by two parametric properties of the D head – EPP and c-selection. The specification of these properties in each language is responsible for generating the distinct RC structures observed. First, D has an EPP feature in Kazakh. This feature is responsible for the movement of the genitive phrase from its base-generation position in Spec, PossP to Spec, DP. In contrast, D in Khalkha lacks this EPP feature. Consequently, there is no corresponding movement, and the genitive RC subject remains in its base-generated RC-internal position.

The second property concerns c-selection. In Kazakh, D obligatorily selects for a PossP, which introduces a possessor argument in its specifier (Spec, PossP). As a result, D can only establish an Agree relationship with the DP that is base-generated in Spec PossP. This constraint makes any derivation where a genitive phrase originates inside the RC and moves to Spec, DP unavailable in Kazakh (27). This mechanism correctly predicts the empirical facts of Kazakh GSRCs: the genitive phrase has an obligatory possessor interpretation in relational noun contexts, and cannot co-occur with another possessor.

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[4] This movement analysis for Kazakh genitive phrases is further supported by independent evidence from NCI/NPI licensing, which confirms that the genitive phrase moves from Spec PossP to the edge of DP. A detailed exposition is reserved for future work due to space constraints.

(27) unavailable derivation for Kazakh

In contrast, the Khalkha D need not select for PossP exclusively, and can select for either PossP or NP. This yields the observed patterns in Khalkha: When D selects for PossP, an external possessor is licensed, which can co-occur with a GSRC contained within the lower NP (Section 3.2.2). When D selects for NP, no external possessor is generated, resulting in a simple GSRC with a genitive subject licensed RC-internally. This explains why the Khalkha genitive RC subject lacks an obligatory possessor interpretation, and can co-occur with an external possessor.

5. Conclusions.

In this paper, we demonstrated that the syntax of GSRCs with non-local agreement is not uniform across languages that employ this strategy. Through a detailed comparison of Kazakh and Khalkha, we have shown that superficially similar constructions in fact involve fundamentally different underlying syntax. We have argued that this structural difference is systematically derived from parametric variations in the properties of D.

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