Genitive focus in Supyire

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Supyire has two distinct genitive constructions, one consisting of juxtaposed nouns, and the other marked with a particle. This study demonstrates that the marked genitive correlates significantly in natural discourse with contrastive focus as operationally defined in Myhill and Xing (1996). The method used avoids the vicious circularity of many discourse-based studies of focus. Contrastive focus, rather than being “coded”, is a pragmatic construal which is dependent on other elements in the communicative context. This construal is only one of the possible construals of the marked genitive (contra Carlson 1994). In this it is not unlike other so-called “contrastive focus” constructions noted in the literature, such as contrastive stress in English.

1 Unmarked and marked genitives in Supyire

Supyire has two genitive constructions, one marked with a genitive particle, the other unmarked. Carlson (1994) devoted a single paragraph to the marked genitive:

“Contrastive focus on a genitive (possessor) noun phrase is indicated by placing a genitive particle *u* between the genitive and the head noun. This particle has weak mid tone, and behaves tonally as if it were a possessed noun, becoming high after a mid tone, and low-weak mid after a low tone. It is obviously related to the independent possessive pronoun root *wu*- . The head noun following the particle is completely unaffected tonally.” (Carlson 1994: 591)

Although this information is basically correct (though the genitive particle is now written *wu* in the orthography, and I would now label what I then called the “independent possessive pronoun” as *possessum pronoun*), the functional claim (“contrastive focus”) was unsubstantiated beyond the furnishing of two
examples which follow the above paragraph in Carlson (1994). It is the purpose
of this paper to both justify and modify that claim.

Genitives in Supyire, whether marked or unmarked, have the obligatory
order POSSESSOR – POSSESSUM.

There is no genitive case marking of nouns, and there are no genitive
forms of pronouns. In the ordinary genitive the possessor and possessum NPs
are merely juxtaposed. The possessum, however, in many cases undergoes a
tonal change. As noted in the paragraph quoted above, the genitive particle also
undergoes these changes, but the following possessum is unaffected tonally.
Compare the following examples: in each ordinary genitive (the (a) examples)
the possessum undergoes a tonal change, whereas in each wu-marked genitive
(the (b) examples) the possessum has its base tone.

(1) possessum weak mid tone becomes high after mid tone possessor
   a. *mu tuŋi* ordinARy
      you father
      ‘your father’
   b. *mu wú tuŋi* marked
      you FOC father
      ‘YOUR father’

(2) possessor ends in floating weak mid tone
   a. *mìì tuŋi* ordinARy
      I father
      ‘my father’
   b. *mìì wú tuŋi* marked
      I FOC father
      ‘MY father’

(3) possessum weak mid becomes low after a low possessor
   a. *wà mèè* ordinARy
      INDEF voice.G3S
      ‘one’s voice’
   b. *wà wú mee* marked
      INDEF FOC voice.G3S
      ‘ONE’S voice’

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1 The second, weak mid, tone of *mii* floats and then disappears after causing a following
weak mid to become high. The sequence L wM wM thus becomes L H.
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(4) possessor ends in a floating low tone ²
a. ḥjé jwàmpé ORDINARY
   these words
   ‘the words of these’
b. ḥjé wù jwumpé MARKED
   these FOC words
   ‘the words of THESE’

(5) possessum low becomes mid after a mid tone possessor
a. mu ḥkùŋi ORDINARY
   you chicken
   ‘your chicken’
b. mu wù ḥkùŋi MARKED
   you FOC chicken
   ‘YOUR chicken’

The wu-marked genitive in Supyire is not only marked in a morphological sense, but it is also marked in a discourse sense. In the coded part of the text database used for this study ³, of the total of 2,738 genitive constructions, only 135 (=4.7%) are wu-genitives.

As noted in the quote from Carlson (1994) above, the genitive particle wu is obviously related to the pronominal possessum form wu-, its probable historical source. ⁴ The pronominal possessum, as its name implies, is obligatorily possessed. It agrees in gender/noun class with its “antecedent”. I put “antecedent” in quotes because, of course, the referents of the possessum pronoun and its “antecedent” are not ordinarily the same. The possessum pronoun indicates another referent of the same category as the “antecedent”, as in the following example:

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² All demonstrative pronouns and all definite noun suffixes end in a floating low tone. This floating L docks onto the following word if it can.
³ The total database currently numbers 45,560 clauses. Of these around 20,000 have been grammatically coded. Many examples of wu-marked genitives from the uncoded part of the database have been used for this study, but the statistics quoted here are based on the coded part.
⁴ It is easy to see how a possessum pronoun of this type, meaning, roughly, “another of the same category as a referent already mentioned or evoked in the context” could be reinterpreted as a possessor focus marker. The referent of the possessum pronoun necessarily forms a set with its “antecedent” (see below for “antecedent”, and section 2 for the role of sets in the construal of contrastive focus). Its possessor will thus also form a set with any possessor of the “antecedent”, and the stage is then set for a contrastive construal. I assume that originally the possessum noun in a wu genitive was an appositive of the wu possessum pronoun. With reanalysis, the noun class marking on the wu pronoun would be completely redundant and be dropped.
Ordinarily this would be understood as referring to two different fathers. Since pronominal possessa will appear in many examples below, the forms are given in Table 1 for reference.

Table 1: Forms of the possessum pronoun

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GENDER</th>
<th>SINGULAR</th>
<th>PLURAL</th>
<th>NON-COUNT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>INDEFINITE</td>
<td>DEFINITE</td>
<td>INDEFINITE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>wu</td>
<td>wuŋí</td>
<td>wûu</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>wogo</td>
<td>wogé</td>
<td>wuyo</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>wuu</td>
<td>wuuní</td>
<td>wógii</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>woro</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>wumɔ</td>
</tr>
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</table>

2 Operationalizing contrastive focus

Lambrecht (1994) shows that focus stress in English, although it has often been claimed to encode contrastive focus, in fact is by no means confined to cases which can be shown to be “contrastive” on the definitions of Halliday (1967: 206 “contrary to some predicted or stated alternative”) or Chafe (1976). Lambrecht suggests that contrast should be treated not as a grammatical category, but as a generalized conversational implicature. However, given the relatively strong intuitions that numerous linguists have noted concerning the interpretation of contrastive stress, and given the fact that a contrastive interpretation is very often one of the available interpretations in the made-up examples which form the bulk of Lambrecht’s data, it would be interesting to see from actual discourse data how often there is a “stated alternative” in the discourse context of focus stress examples. This of course raises the methodological question of how to actually recognize, in a replicable way, an instance of contrast in a text.

Myhill and Xing (1996) set out to provide an answer to this methodological question, and apply it to Biblical Hebrew and Chinese discourse data. For reasons of space they look only at cases of fronted direct objects in the two languages, but they are able to provide evidence that (i) fronting of objects does indeed correlate significantly with contrast, using their operational definition of contrast, and (ii) a significant number of fronted objects do not have anything to do with contrast as so defined. The interest of Myhill and

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5 That is, what Lambrecht calls “attested examples.”
Xing’s study is that by operationalizing the notion of contrast to overtly observable phenomena in a text, they escape from methodological circularity. The danger of such circularity is particularly high in the case of *wu*-marked genitives in Supyire. It is all too easy to fall into the following type of “analytical” practice: “Hypothesis: *wu* marks contrastive focus on the possessor NP in a genitive construction. Here is a *wu* marked genitive. Let me see, what is the contrast in this example?” Only an explicit and objective definition can guard against this type of circularity.

Basically, Myhill and Xing look at “stated alternatives” (and in a very restricted way at implicit alternatives, corresponding roughly to Halliday’s “predicted alternatives”) and are able to say what proportion of object fronting is covered by these cases. The notion of alternative implies a set relation between the alternatives. Operationally realizing the notion of set is difficult. In this study I have used Myhill and Xing’s list of types of groupings that may be considered a set (1996: 310-311):

(7) a. **Complementary**: Any pair of elements which are represented as complementary parts of a whole constitute a set…

b. **Organizational**: A group of people and things which are in the same ‘social organization’ constitutes a set. As types of organization, we counted families, companies, military units, etc. Possessions are counted as being part of a set with their owners…

c. **Proximate**: A group of people who are at the moment physically together, as in a conversation or on a trip, constitute a set…

d. **Hierarchical**: Specific individuals who are at the same level of a larger set of individuals constitute a set. This includes members of a family of the same generation, people at the same rank in a company, etc…

e. **Rhetorical**: Entities or concepts which are habitually grouped together in terms of activities or proverbs/slogans by a particular culture constitute a set for that culture…

f. **Conjoined**: A set may be constituted by explicitly conjoining the NPs involved… The entities referred to by the conjoined NPs then constitute a set in the discourse and presumably remain as a set for some time.

g. **Analogical**: Any pair of elements which have a parallel relationship with members of a set (e.g. the names of brothers, the parents of a husband and wife) also constitute a set. For example, in *We will give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters for ourselves*, the speaker and the listener constitute a set (type c), and therefore their daughters also constitute a set.

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6 Cf. Chafe’s (1976) requirement for contrast that there be a set of possible candidates for the role that is being contrasted.
Myhill and Xing propose two operational definitions that cover the cases that have been called contrastive in the literature. They call the two types “list” and “contrast” (1996: 306ff). In the “list” type, there are two NPs in their respective clauses which are elements of a set as defined above, while the verbs and other information in the clauses is essentially the same. For the “contrast” type, which approximates Chafe’s “double contrast”, there are two subtypes. In one (called “verbal contrast”), the verbs in the two clauses are opposite, either because one is negated, or because they are antonyms of some sort. In “non-verbal contrast”, on the other hand, there is a further pair of NPs, one in each clause, which are elements of a set as defined above.

Adopting Myhill and Xing’s method to genitive constructions in Supyire, I will say that a genitive possessor is clearly contrastive if in the immediate context (not more than 6 clauses away) there is (i) another NP such that the genitive possessor and this other NP are elements of a set as defined above, and (ii) this NP is also either explicitly or by implication the possessor of a possessum such that the possessa of the two genitive constructions (that is, the wu-marked genitive and the one with which it contrasts) are elements of a set as defined above. If all other elements in the two clauses are the same, then the example approximates what Myhill and Xing call the “list” function. If there are further contrasting elements in the two clauses, the example is similar to Myhill and Xing’s “contrast” function. There are in turn two subtypes of additional contrastive elements, (i) antonymous possessa in the two genitives, and (ii) predicates with opposite meaning (either due to negation of one of them, or use of antonymous verbs or adjectives). In some cases, the contrasting predicate is not explicit but must be inferred.

In this study I look only at wu-marked genitives. In further research, I intend to look at both ordinary genitives and genitives with pronominal possessa. Of the 214 wu-marked genitives in the corpus, 113 (= 52.8%) may be identified as contrastive by the above definitions. Of these, 56 (= 26.2% of the total) are explicitly constrained with another genitive in the context. This second genitive may or may not be marked itself with wu. Those examples approximating the “list function” of Myhill and Xing number 24 (= 11.2% of total). These will be treated in section 3 below. All the others (N = 89 = 41.6% of total) have additional contrastive elements in the context. These will be discussed in sections 4 (those with explicit contrasting genitives) and 5 (those with implied contrasting possessa). The remaining 101 examples, which cannot be shown to be contrastive by the definitions above, will be treated in section 6.

3 Constrastive possessors in “listed” genitives
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The following examples illustrate contrast between possessors that are merely listed. If the possessa are distinguished only by their possessors, they may be coded with possessum pronouns:

(8) 
*Lepjyaàyi taanna-ŋkànni: pi màha bànnibìí le,*
crossbeams line.up-manner they HAB transverse-beams put
‘The way the crossbeams are lined up: they install the transverse beams,
nà *çanjàwumò wù-ŋi*
crossbeams line.up-manner they HAB transverse-beams put
*nà çanjà forormò wù-ŋi*
crossbeams line.up-manner they HAB transverse-beams put
*nà çanjà forormò wù-ŋi*
crossbeams line.up-manner they HAB transverse-beams put

In the following example, the possessa set is sums of money given on a particular occasion. The possessor set is those who gave the sums in question. The particle *yòo* has as one of its functions the marking of items in a set, and is therefore glossed *LIST*.

(9) 
*Ká Bugúdògò-ŋí si ð-cyà,*
and Bugudògò-DEF.G1S NARR INTR7-seek
‘Then the Bugudògò was fetched.

*Mìì biduuru-ŋí yòo, Zùmanì wù daashìi kàpkúri-ŋí*
I 50-DEF.G1S LIST Zumani FOC 5.franc.piece five-DEF.G1S
My 250⁸ francs, ZUMANI’s 25 francs

*u à cya Bàba á ge, maá úrí kán u à,*
he PERF seek Baba from REL and.NARR it give him to
which he had got from Baba, [we] gave it to him (= to the Bugudògò),

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7 The intransitive prefix occurs only after certain tense-aspect auxiliaries (among them the narrative auxiliary, as here) and only when the verb begins with a voiceless plosive.

8 Money is counted using the basic unit of the smallest coin, 5 francs. Thus 50 (units of 5 francs) equals 250 francs, and five (units of five francs) equals 25 francs.
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$lù$-$wu$-$ŋ$’  ā,  $maá$  yí  $jwú$  u  a  $si$  $ná$  ú ́ ĕ.

water-pour-DEF.G1S to and. NARR it say he SBJCV.IMPFV go with it with to the libation-offerer, and said he should take it away.’

4 Additional contrastive elements in the context

In a further 32 examples, there is additional contextual support for a contrastive interpretation. In some cases this is merely negation: one of the contrasted genitives is in a clause with a negated predicate whereas the other one is not. The following two examples come from a tale in which Coucal and God have a contest to see whose voice will carry the farthest. In (10) the same verb is used in the two clauses (one of which is negated). The situation in (11) is more complicated: in the first clause the contrasted genitive is the subject, and the predicate is “heard God’s”, while in the second clause the contrasted genitive is a goal postpositional phrase in a negative clause “Coucal’s didn’t arrive”. The song being heard by the addressee can be counted as synonymous with the song arriving at the addressee. This example is thus similar to (10) in that one of the synonymous predicates is negated.

(10) $Kà$  $Dúdugo$  rí  m̀pá  lì tā  $uru$  $wù$  $mee$-$nf$  $nye$  a  jà

and Coucal NARR come it find he FOC voice-DEF.G3S NEG PERF be.able

‘Then Coucal realized that HIS voice had not been able to

ā  nɔ  u  wù $cwô-hi$  na  mé,  $Kile$  $wù$-$nf$  d’  ’a  ’nɔ …

SCN arrive he FOC wife.DEF.G1S NARR God POSS-DEF.G3S ADV PERF arrive reach his wife, whereas GOD’S had reached …’

(11) $Kà$  $Kile$  $wù$  $cwô$-$qi$  di  $Kile$  $wù$-$yi$  $lògò$,

and God FOC wife-DEF.G1S NARR God POSS-DEF.G2P hear

‘God’s wife heard God’s [song],

$Dúdugo$  $wù$-$yi$  $nye$  a  nɔ  mé,  $uru$  $wù$  $cwô$-$qi$  na  mé.

Coucal POSS-DEF.G2P NEG PERF arrive NEG he FOC wife-DEF.G1S at NEG Coucal’s [song] didn’t reach, didn’t reach HIS wife.’

The additional contrast may stem from the use of antonyms. The following example, a proverb, has antonymic possessa (good deed vs. bad deed):

(12) $Wà$  $wù$  $ka$-$cènnè$  màha  $mpyi$  $wà$  $wù$  $ka$-$pi$.$

INDEF FOC deed-good.G3S HAB be INDEF FOC deed-bad.G3S

‘ONE PERSON’S good deed is ANOTHER PERSON’S bad deed.’
The antonyms may be elsewhere in the context. In the following example, from a discourse on how to weave, the verbs of which the possessa are subjects are antonyms (go down vs. go up):

(13) *Mu ahá ŋ̀ké toɔg ę tǹhà, *kuru *ndiríbí ọ-ní *màha *ntigè,*
you COND this foot.DEF.G2S put.down it.G2S pedal.DEF.G3S HAB go.down
‘When you lower this foot, its pedal goes down,

sìizí-ŋ’ ásì múgó, *mu arì kàzo-ní wà.*
thread-DEF.G1S HAB open you HAB shuttle-DEF.G3S throw
the threads open and you throw the shuttle.

‘ŋ̀ké toɔg ę sàŋŋke, *kuru wù ndiríbí ọ-ní màha dugo,*
this foot.DEF.G2S other it.G2S FOC pedal.DEF.G3S HAB go.up
This other foot, its pedal goes up

sìizí-ŋ’ árì ñtò…
thread-DEF.G1S HAB close
and the threads close…’

The following example has both antonymous verbs (refuse to take vs. take) and antonymous adjectives (good/clean vs. dirty). Note that there is a double wù, and both sets of possessors are contrasted:

(14) Pi *a cyì wìðu mjificação njincenm-pítí wìì yaa-yí njincen-yí*
they PERF refuse we these good-DEF.G1P FOC things-DEF.G2P good-DEF.G2P
‘Have they refused to take and drink the water of THE CLEAN THINGS of US
GOOD

wù lwo-hé shwo-mbya-ga, sí jkwɔ yií mjificação wù
FOC water-DEF.G2S take-drink-G2S SBJCV finish you these FOC
PEOPLE, in order to take and drink that of THE DIRTY LITTLE CALABASH

cee-nwɔhɔ-ré wò-gé shwo mbyà la?
calabash-dirty-DIM POSS-DEF.G2S take drink QUES
of YOU here?’

Fully sixteen examples show some combination of negation and antonyms. Following, by way of illustration, is a complicated but not atypical example. The possessors are contrasted as expected (today vs. tomorrow). There is a further contrast between the possessa (few vs. many fish) which is distributed differently in the two clauses: a negated verb (‘not be many’) in the first clause
contrasts with an adjective modifying the possessum in the second clause (‘many’). There is a further constrastive set in the context (‘me’ vs. ‘you’) which contributes to make a highly contrastive example.

(15) A, nínjáà wu fya-ngú-re nàha à nyaha mè.
    ah today FOC fish-small. and.bad.quality-DEF. G4 NEG. here PERF be. many NEG
    ‘Ah, TODAY’s miserable small fish are not many.

Mu nínjáà wòò-re yaha mii á,
    you today POSS-DEF. G4 leave me to
You should let me have today’s,

nùmpansa wóó-re nínjyaha-ré wùu ú mìpá tìrè kán mu á.
    tomorrow POSS-DEF. G4 many-DEF. G4 we SBJCV come them give you to
TOMORROW’s numerous ones, we will give them to you.’

Besides negation and antonyms, one further type of contextual reinforcement of contrast is the use of the overt comparative construction. In the following example, from a conversation about two balafons, there are two pairs of contrasted genitive constructions, each in a comparative clause:

(16) N: `Ƞké sì ɲ-fà mè máhá mèe céè ke,
    this FUT FP-be. able song every song sing REL
    ‘Whatever song this one can play,

 AMPá hà líre céè. Aan.
    this HAB it sing yes
    this [other] one can play. Yes.

A: Mèe wà wù ɲkòon-g’ a tààn wà wò-gò nà la?
    but INDEF FOC throat-DEF. G2S PERF be. sweet INDEF POSS- G2S on QUES
    But is the sound of ONE more pleasant than that of THE OTHER?

N: Wà wù ɲkòon-g’ a pèè wà wò-gò nà …
    INDEF FOC throat-DEF. G2S PERF be. big INDEF POSS- G2S on
    The sound of ONE is louder than that of THE OTHER…’

5 Contrast without an explicit second genitive construction

As noted above, a wu-marked genitive possessor may be contrasted with another member of its set which is mentioned explicitly in the context, but which is not the possessor in a second genitive construction. In these cases, it is clear that the
“missing” possessum, which is of course evoked by the explicit possessum, is implicit in the conceptualization of the scene. In the following example, ‘another snake’ in line 4 is contrasted with ‘the python’ which is the possessor of the wu-genitive in the final line. The implicit member of the possessum set ‘poison (of snakes)’ is of course implied by the bite of the second snake in line 4.

(17) *Fyì-ŋi kà mu no,*
python-DEF.G1S COND you bite
‘If the python bites you,

*mu méé ñpyí mu nyè à wyere pyí mé,*
you even if be you NEG PERF medicine do NEG
even if you don’t treat it,

*yafyìn nyè na mu táà me.*
nothing NEG PROG you get.IMPFV NEG
nothing happens to you.

*Lire kàntugo, wwò-ŋi wàbèrè kà mu no,*
that behind snake-DEF.G1S another COND you bite
Later on, if another snake bites you

*kà mu ú wyere pyí uru wwò-ŋi tà-nɔŋ-ké na,*
and you NARR medicine do that snake-DEF.G1S LOC-bite-DEF.G2S on
and you treat that snake’s bite,

*fyì-ŋi màha mu bó.*
python-DEF.G1S HAB you kill
the python kills you.

*Náhá ná ye, u màha jwo,*
what on QUES he HAB say
Why? Because he says,

“I *mìì u nyë wwò-o-bíí puní màsàké-ŋi,*
he be snakes-DEF.G1P all king-DEF.G1S,
“It is I who am the king of all the snakes.

*kà mìì í mu no,*
and I NARR you bite
I bit you,
mu nyé à wyere pyi mé.
you NEG PERF medicine do NEG
but you didn’t treat the bite.

Mìì bílí-ŋi  wà à pà  mu  nɔ,
I slave-DEF.G1S INDEF PERF come you bite
Then one of my slaves came and bit you,

kà mu ú úrú wyéré pyí,
and you NARR it medicine do
and you treated it.

mu à wurugo.”
you PERF do. wrong
You have done wrong.”

Fyì-ŋi  wù  sɔ̀n-re  màha  mu  bó.
python-DEF.G1S FOC poison-DEF.G4 HAB you kill
The python’s poison kills you.’

In the following example, the wu-marked possessor (the Wara fetish) is explicitly contrasted with the king of Sikasso. They form a set in that both are executing wrongdoers in Sikasso. The implicit member of the possessum set (‘people-killing’) is of course implied in the clause “you (= the king of Sikasso) are killing people”.

(18) Ká mu ú jwú “é! fânhâtee shuunní sì  jì-jà  m-pyì
and you NARR say e! kings two FUT FP-be.able FP-be
‘Then you (= the king of Sikasso) said, “E! There cannot be two kings

Sukwol’e mé.” Mu na supyì-re kwùù,  Wârá-ŋi  sì
Sikasso in NEG you PROG people-DEF.G4 kill.IMPFV wara-DEF.G1S ADV.PROG
in Sikasso.” You are killing people, yet the Wara (= a type of fetish) is also

supyì-re kwùù. Mu na căwârâ-ŋi  fôdà  tâha à wârá-ŋi
people-DEF.G4 kill.IMPFV you PROG FUT Wara-DEF.G1S owner use SCN Wara-DEF
killing people. You will sacrifice the Wara owner to the Wara.

sun.    Wârá-ŋi  wù  supyì-bô-ŋi  li  gù  jì-jyérê.
offer.sacrifice Wara-DEF.G1S FOC people-kill-DEF.G3S it POT FP-stop.
It is the Wara’s killing of people that would stop.’
It is also possible for the contrasting member of the possessor set to be present in the speech situation rather than mentioned in the discourse. In the following example, the set given in the speech situation is that of all those offering sacrifices on a particular occasion. In most sacrifices, a chicken or goat must be brought by each head of household. He typically says, as he hands the sacrificial animal to the sacrificer, “This is MY chicken,” or “Here is MY animal.” In lieu of an actual animal, the offering may consist of a sum of money, but even in that case the offerer will say “Here is MY animal.” In the following example, the occasion was the inauguration of a new jinn house. Heads of household and various individuals brought chickens to sacrifice. Speaker A was interviewing speaker K while the ceremony was going on. Speaker K is a uterine niece of the patriclan that was inaugurating the jinn house. The object of the interview was to find out what role K played as a uterine niece at the event. K states that she gave money in lieu of an animal. She implicitly contrasts herself with all the other people who offered sacrifices that day.

(19) A: Еɛ,mu à... yìì ɲ̀cyɛ̀n naké,  
   uh you PERF you.PL PERF come jinn-house inauguration onTIME.CLAUSE  
   ‘Uh, since you … you have come to the inauguration of the jinn house,

   K: Hmm.  
   Yes.

A:narafoo-báárá na ɲye nahá la? Jíná-bagé ḟcyènŋí cyàgé e la?  
   narafoo work PROG be here QUES jinn-house inauguration place in QUES  
   is there any role for a uterine niece? At the inauguration of the jinn house?

   K: Aan.  
   Yes.

A: Mu à pa gé, ɲàhá ná ɲàhá mu à pyi ye?  
   you PERF come TIME.CLAUSE what and what you PERF do QUES  
   Since you came, what things have you done?

   K: Miì à pa maá wyé ʁwūl’ ˈa tirigè,  
   I PERF come and.NARR money take.out SCN put.down  
   I came and put down some money,

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9 The interviewer (A) is considerably younger than the interviewee (K). He starts to address K with the singular pronoun mu and then thinks better of it and switches to the plural pronoun yìì, which is more respectful. The … is not an omission, but merely signals the restart. The interviewer switches back to a singular pronoun in line 5 of the example.

10 Narafoo is the term used for both uterine nephew and uterine niece of a clan.
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A: Hmm.
   Yes.

K: j̣i jwù, “Mìì wú yatɔɔ̀-ge ku ɲkíré.”
   I said animal-DEF.G2S it this
   and said, “This is MY animal.”

Another speech situation with an obvious contrastive set is any conversation,
where the interlocuters form a set (cf. 7c above).

(20) Là màha pi sanmpíí jà, mu màha ja lire na.
   INDEF HAB them rest defeat you HAB be.able it on
   ‘Something may be too much for the others, but you are able to handle it.

Mìì wú hákìlì-ɲí na, lire na ɲye kyaà nǐncenne.
   I mind-DEF.G1S at that PROG be thing good
   In MY opinion, that’s a good thing.’

6 Non-contrastive examples

A large number of wu-marked genitives (101, = 47.2%) cannot be shown to be
contrastive in the operational sense employed above. This is not surprising in
that other focus constructions which may also be interpreted as at least
sometimes contrastive and that have been discussed in the literature are also
reported to have non-contrastive uses. For focus stress in English, see
Lambrecht (1994: 286ff). Unfortunately, Lambrecht does not provide any actual
discourse data (there is only one “attested” example in the discussion), let alone
any frequencies. Myhill and Xing (1996) show that 51% (59 of 116) of fronted
objects in their corpus of Biblical Hebrew can be shown to be contrastive using
their operational definition (1996: 325). In Chinese they investigated four
different “patient-fronting” constructions, and they show that contrastive uses
account for 15%, 32%, 22%, and 11% of the respective constructions (1996:
329). A proportion of 52.8% (N = 113) for wu-marked genitives in Supyire thus
falls in about the same range as object fronting in Biblical Hebrew.

Following are three examples of non-contrastive wu-marked genitives by
way of illustration. The first example is from the same interview as example
(19) above.

(21) A: Nàhá nà nàhámu rá à pyí a ní Nacíní ye?
   what and what you go PERF do there Nacinin QUES
   ‘What things did you go do there in Nacin?’
Genitive focus in Supyire

*Cyître njcyíí cyíí ye?*
these these INDEF QUES
What things of this sort?

K: `Ncyíí mìì à pyí aní nɪpcyiigíí ge,
these I PERF do there first.ones REL
The first things I did there,

A: Aan.
Yes.

K: ceè-ɲì wà wù kišhyahà mpyì à waha,
woman-DEF.G1S INDEF FOC luck PAST PERF be.hard
a certain woman’s luck was bad,

u gú ràa ntàà me.
she POT PROG get.IMPFV NEG
she wasn’t getting children.’

The following example is from a folktale.

(22) Nyà, pi a sà ‘Mpi yaha aní ke,
well they PERF go Hare leave there TIME.CLAUSE
‘Well, when they went and left Hare there,

maá yí jwú ‘Mpi á,
and.NARR it say Hare to
they said to Hare,

(Lirè tèn’ a sùpyíí-bíí piì wù kerege ta aní númè.)
this time PERF people-DEF.G1P INDEF FOC field find there now
(At that time a field of some people was there.)

pi a yí jwù ‘Mpi á ke,
they PERF it say Hare to TIME.CLAUSE
when they said to Hare,

“Bon ee si-shyé-nàmabaabí kà mòàa pi si-shë-bòrigíí
bon uh bush-go-men COND come.IMPFV they bush-go-bags
“OK, uh, when the farmers are coming and hanging up their
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yùù na duruge…
take.IMPFV PROG raise.IMPFV
farming bags…’

In both of the previous examples the possessor is indefinite, although referential. In the final example, from another interview, it is definite:

(23) A: Bémii jye nàhá ye?
bemii be what QUES
‘What are bemii?’

D: Nwòhòyyee cyáge, nàmpèyyè-yí tàtèn-gé.
men.old place men.hero.old-DEF.G2P dwelling.place-DEF.G2S
The place of the old men, the dwelling place of the heroes of old.

Fólófóló wòu tîi-bíí wòu tateǹ-ge.
long.ago we fathers-DEF.G1P FOC dwelling.place-DEF.G2S
The dwelling place of our fathers

ku rú jye bémii.
that it be bemii
of long ago, that is bemii.’

7 Discussion

The construal of an entity as an “alternative” is a pragmatic act, whether that entity is referred to in the discourse, inferred from some other entity that is mentioned, or present in the speech situation. Even if there is an overt second genitive, as in the examples in sections 3 and 4, it still must be interpreted as contrastive to the wu-marked genitive. There may be other genitives in the context which are not to be construed as contrastive. The construction of sets, itself a pragmatic act, for both possessors and possessa, is crucial. For instance, in example (11) there are two genitive constructions, with pronominal possessa, which intervene between the two genitive constructions which I take to be contrastive. The possessa of the intervening genitives do not form a set with the possessa of the contrasting genitives, although their possessors are the same. The pragmatic construal of contrast by the hearer crucially depends on the construction of sets. These sets are not marked in any way, but must be inferred.

We may assume that the wu-marked genitive has the effect of triggering an “open presupposed genitive” (My father implying x’s father) analogous to the “open presupposed proposition” said to be triggered by focal stress in English (Sue hit Bill implying x hit Bill) (Lambrecht 1994: 277ff; cf. Breheny 1998). The
Supyire hearer is thus cued to be ready for the possibility that the referent of the $x$ variable may be an something else in the context, and will be ready to draw that contrastive inference in case that “something” is encountered (usually coming in the next clause or two, but sometimes already in working memory from a previous mention). The evidence reviewed above shows that roughly half the time such an inference will be highly supported by the context. It is interesting that in more than half the cases the construal of contrast is supported by further elements in the context (antonymous possessa or other antonyms outside the genitive constructions themselves or negation), as shown in section 4.

Almost half the time there is no obvious contrast in the context. These cases will have to be studied further in order to see whether (i) there is contrast, but it is arrived at via inferences which are more subtle than those captured by Myhill and Xing’s operationalization of contrast, or (ii) $wu$-marked genitives encode general focus which is not always contrastive. The latter seems the more likely in view of Lambrecht’s claims about English focal stress. In fact, as Myhill and Xing’s study hints, and as Lambrecht suggests, it may be the case that no language has a construction which is uniquely devoted to contrastive focus, but that contrast is always only one of the possible interpretations of a given focus construction. In view of this likelihood, the statement in Carlson (1994) quoted in section 1 should be revised by removing the word “contrastive”.

It remains to be seen if other subtypes of focus can be operationalized in a fashion similar to the operationalization of contrastive focus. If so, it will be possible to see if $wu$-marked genitives correlate with other types of focus so defined. It seems likely, though, that the very vagueness of the notion of focus ensures that a construction such as the Supyire $wu$-marked genitive can be construed contextually in a number of ways. We should not expect a 100% “coding” relation between such a construction and any particular independently defined type of focus.

As noted above, the other half of this study remains to be done. Ordinary genitives will need to be examined to see how many of them correlate with contrastive focus as operationally defined above. My hypothesis is that a much lower percentage will occur in contexts which explicitly invite a contrastive inference.

8 Abbreviations

ADV adversative auxiliary
COND conditional mood auxiliary

11 I assume a relatively small “contrastive space” for the processing of contrast (cf. Breheny 1998). This is the main reason for limiting the search space to 6 clauses in either direction.
DEF definite noun suffix (also marks noun class)
DIM diminutive noun suffix
FOC genitive focus particle
FP future tense verb prefix
FUT future tense auxiliary
G1S gender 1 singular noun suffix
G1P gender 1 plural noun suffix
G2S gender 2 singular noun suffix
G2P gender 2 plural noun suffix
G3S gender 3 singular noun suffix
G4 gender 4 noun suffix
HAB habitual tense auxiliary
IMPFV imperfective aspect (auxiliary or verb suffix)
INDEF indefinite pronoun or determiner
INTR intransitive verb prefix
LOC locative nominal prefix
NARR narrative tense auxiliary
NEG negative auxiliary or clause final marker
PERF perfect tense-aspect auxiliary
POSS possessum pronoun
POT potential auxiliary
PROG progressive aspect auxiliary
QUES clause final question marker
REL relative clause marker
SBJCV subjunctive mood auxiliary
SCN serial verb connective
SEQ sequential tense auxiliary

9 References


