

# Word Order Variation: the Case of the Possessive and the Noun in Limbum Nominal Construction

Gratiana Linyor Ndamsah, Ph.D

Department of African Languages and Linguistics

University of Yaounde 1, Cameroon

[gratiana.ndamsah@yahoo.com](mailto:gratiana.ndamsah@yahoo.com)

## **Abstract**

*Limbum is one of the Grassfield Bantu languages of the Northern group. This language is spoken by a greater part of the population that occupies the Nkambe plateau in Donga and Mantung Division of the North West Region of Cameroon. This paper examines the constituent structure of constructions which contain the possessive determiner and the noun, and analyzes the word order variations that occur between the possessive and the noun. Given the fact that the possessive can either precede or follow the noun in Limbum, using the semantic criteria, the paper argues that unlike the general assumption for Grassfield Bantu languages where the neutral word order in this type of constructions is NOUN > POSSESSIVE while the focused option is POSSESSIVE > NOUN, the Limbum data, shows the reverse: when the possessive precedes the noun, it denotes the neutral form while contrastive focus is achieved by post-posing the possessive determiner to the noun. Based on the Minimalist Program as propounded by Chomsky (1995), the analysis that can account for the Limbum data warrants a revisiting of the structure for Grassfield Bantu languages as proposed by Tamanji and Tabe (ms) and Kouankem (2010). This reanalysis proposes the projection of a functional phrase: PossP (Possessive Phrase) above the DP when it concerns the neutral construction and the projection of a FocP (Focus Phrase) in the case of contrastive focus. Heavy pied-piping of the post possessive elements to Spec-FocP will yield the correct word order for contrastive focus. Such an analysis permits achievement of the correct word order, and also permits the possessive to have a focused reading.*

**Key words:** Possessive Determiner, contrastive focus, Heavy Pied-piping, Word Order

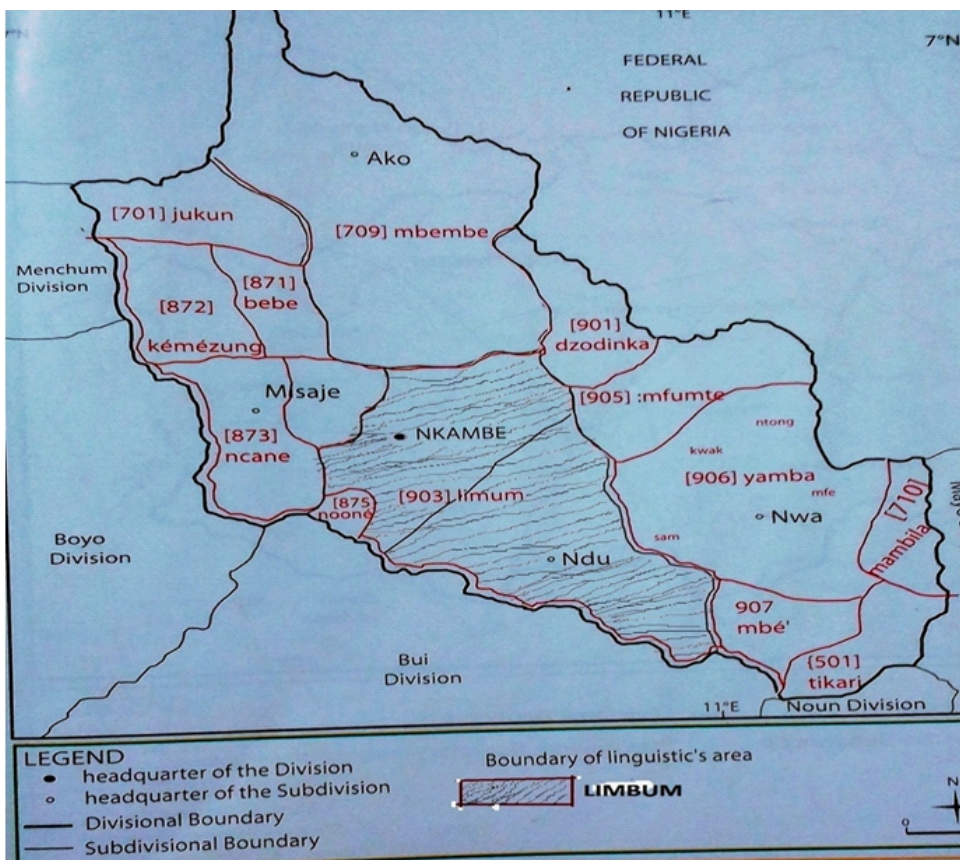
## **Abbreviations:**

Sg	Singular	Pref.	Prefix	Pl.	Plural
Agr.	Agreement	Poss.	Possessive	Foc.	Focus
Num.	Numeeral	P	Phrase		

## Introduction

The relationship between the noun and an accompanying possessive in Limbum constructions shows some peculiarities which is worth examining. Limbum is a language spoken in a greater part of the Nkambe plateau of the North West Region of Cameroon. This language has been classified as a Grassfield Bantu language of the Northern group (Dieu and Renaud 1983, BinamBikoi(ed) 2012). The map below shows the sociolinguistic situation of Limbu.

Figure 1: The sociolinguistic situation of Limbum



Adapted from BinamBikoi (ed) 2012:137

As can be seen from the figure above, Limbum is surrounded by the following languages: to the North East it is bounded by Mfumte, Yamba and Dzodinka, in the north of Limbum, there is Mbenbe, Nsare and Ncane to the North West of Limbum. While Noone is spoken in the to the West of Limbum, Lamnso is spoken in the South.

In Limbum, just like in many Grassfield Bantu languages, there are variations between the position of occurrence between the noun and the possessive determiner with which it occurs. There are instances where the possessive precedes the noun and in other cases it follows the noun. These variant word orders are normal as this has been identified for other Grassfield Bantu Languages (Tamanji(1999), Kouankem (2010) and Tamanji and Tabe (ms)and others). In the analysis of these construction types in their various languages by the aforementioned authors, when the possessive occurs at a post noun position, it is considered as translating the neutral meaning but when the possessive is pre-posed to the noun, the construction is given a contrastive focus interpretation. In our examination of the Limbum data, we discovered that the reverse is true: while the pre-posed possessive translates the neutral word order, the post-posed position gives the construction a contrastive focus interpretation. In view of this divergence, this paper seeks to undertake an in-depth analysis of the Limbum data with a view of proposing the appropriate constituent structure that can better handle this divergent interpretation.

This paper is divided into five sections. Section one introduces the paper. Section two presents the Limbum data with regards to the various word orders that obtains when the possessive determiner occurs with a noun. In section three, there is the presentation of a probable analysis of such constructions as has been handled for Grassfield Bantu languages in the light of Chomsky's Minimalist Program. In the course of this analysis, the problems encountered in accounting for the Limbum data in the same way as the data from other languages of the same family (Grassfield Bantu languages) are brought out. Section four then proposes an alternative analysis of the Limbum data still within the ambit of the Minimalist Program and proposes the projection of a PossP for the neutral word order and a FocP to account for a contrastive reading of the focused possessive. Heavy Pied-piping (Nkemnji 1995) plays a great role in achieving the correct word order and this contrastive reading. The fifth section concludes the paper.

## **Literature review on Limbum**

Any piece of research work can either lay the foundation for further works on the language or it might explore other grounds which other research works have not touched. As far as Limbum is concerned, there has been quite a lot of existing material in the domain of literacy, most of them written by the Summer Institute of Linguistics in collaboration with members of the Wimbun Literacy Committee (WILA). In the domain of scientific works, there is Fiore (1987), Ndamsah (1989), (2012), (2014), (2017a), (2017b), (2019), Mpoche (1993), Franssen (1995), Tabah (2002) and Nfongwei (2007). From this inventory, it can be noticed that the present analysis seeks to provide an in-depth view of a construction type that has not been handled by previous research on the language.

## **The Limbum data**

As earlier mentioned, when the possessive determiner and the noun co-occur in Limbum, there are two possible word orders between the possessive determiner and the noun. The possessive can either precede the noun or follow the noun with which it occurs. This word order change has an effect on the meaning. This section presents constructions in Limbum where the noun is accompanied by a possessive determiner. In the first part of the section, the constructions handled are those which have the possessive determiner preceding the noun and in the second part, the Limbum data with the possessive in a post nominal position is presented.

## **The possessive determiner at pre-noun position**

In this part of the first section, the Limbum data made up of a possessive determiner and the noun is presented. Here, emphasis is laid on the constituent construction that has the possessive preceding the noun. The examples below are illustrative.

- |       |             |                |   |       |
|-------|-------------|----------------|---|-------|
| 1. a. | lá          | r              | - | tā:   |
|       | my          | Sg. Ncl. Pref. |   | cap   |
|       | “my cap”    |                |   |       |
| b.    | má          | m              | - | tā:   |
|       | my          | Pl. Ncl. Pref. |   | cap   |
|       | “my caps”   |                |   |       |
| 2. a. | ví          | ∅              | - | lába? |
|       | his         | Sg. Ncl. Pref. |   | shoe  |
|       | “his shoe”  |                |   |       |
| b.    | ví          | b              | - | lába? |
|       | his         | Pl. Ncl. Pref. |   | shoes |
|       | “his shoes” |                |   |       |

The change in the form of the possessive determiner in Limbum is simply in relation to the class of the noun.

When constructions like these above are uttered in Limbum, the listener considers it as a simple presentation of an idea. There is no other undertone or interpretation given to them. This is why these types of constructions are analyzed as neutral constructions. In other words, I can say the constructions in (1) and (2) above are simply presentational. This is contrary to what obtains for some Grassfield Bantu languages like Bafut (Tamanji and Tabems) and for Mdm̄b̄ (Kouankem2010). These authors, in their analysis of data from their respective languages find out that the neutral word order as far as the possessive in relation to the noun is concerned, is gotten when the possessive follows the noun. The constructions below are adapted from Kouankem respectively as illustrations.

3. **Bafut**  
 ntam dza  
 shoe my  
 “my shoe”
4. **Mdm̄b̄**  
 nca s-m  
 bottle Agr-my  
 “my bottle”

Adapted from Kouankem (2010:136)

These authors argue that when the above constructions are uttered in their respective languages, they are considered as simply presentational. In this regard, while a Bafut speaker during a normal conversation can say;

5      fá            ntám            dzà            mbó            m̀è  
         give        shoe            my            to            me  
         “give me my shoe”

A native speaker will produce the same sentence in (5) above as shown in (6) below;

6.      f́ó            j̀òm            ηgə́tú?            m̀è  
         give        me            shoe            my  
         “give me my shoe”

The above renditions in the respective languages are neutral. The interpretation of the differences between the Limbum constructions whose possessives are pre-posed to the noun and their BafutandMdm̀b̀ counterpartners as the neutral form is arrived at by considering the meanings that they respectively convey.

### The possessive determiner at post-noun position

In Limbum, for purposes of contrastive focus, the possessive determiner follows the noun. Let us consider the constructions below.

7a.      rtā:            lá  
         cap        my  
         “my cap (as opposed to yours)”

b.      mnd̄ip            má  
         water        my  
         “my water (as opposed to yours)”

The semantic difference between the constructions in (6) above as against those in (1a) and (2a) is that in (1a) and (2a), the constructions are simple possessive constructions. In other words, these constructions are merely presentational. But in (6), there is some emphasis placed on the possessive determiner. Kouankem (2010) notices the same sequence as in (6) for Mdm̀b̀, a Grassfield Bantu Language. In her analysis of the Mdm̀b̀ data,

she posits that the post- nominal occurrence of the possessive determiner is the basic word order and the pre-nominal position is the derived. She handles the relationship between the “pronominal possessor” and the noun as a genitive relation. She bases her arguments on tonal changes that occur on these possessives when they occur with nouns in analogy with the kind of tonal changes that occur on the head noun in genitive constructions. Her conclusions are further buttressed by the same line of analysis by Kayne (1994) and Aboh (2006) who hold the same view.

In Tamanji and Tabe (ms), an examination of data from the Bafut language (another Grassfield Bantu language) also reveals that the post nominal position is the basic one and the pre-nominal occurrence is the derived structure. One of the examples they use to illustrate the basic position of the possessive determiner is a construction like that in (3) above, from which we extract the Mdm̄b̄a sentence and repeat below as (8).

- M̄d̄m̄b̄a**
- 8a. nc̄aŋ s-àm  
bottle Agr-my  
“my bottle”
- b. b̄a s-ù  
house Agr-your  
“your house”

Adapted from Kouankem (2010:136)

In our analysis of the Limbum data, despite the fact that this possessive agrees with the noun with which it occurs, the post-nominal position in the language is the derived position while the pre- noun position is the normal or neutral position. This first claim is based on semantic facts about Limbum. The meaning given to the construction type in Limbum: with the possessive determiner at a post-noun position, indicates a contrastive focus reading. When a Limbum speaker produces a construction with the possessive determiner at a post-noun position, the idea expressed is that he intends to highlight the ownership of the noun. On the other hand, with a pre-posed possessive, this emphasis is not felt. Another argument that comes in to deviate from the same line of analysis of the Limbum data with the analysis of the Mdm̄b̄a data derives from the structural differences: the same tonal changes accounted for by Kouankem in Mdm̄b̄a do not occur in Limbum. In Limbum,

the genitive marker just like in Mdm̄b̄α is a high floating tone that docks unto the final syllable of the head noun. While this genitive tone docks unto the head noun in a construction containing a noun and the possessive in Mdm̄b̄α, Limbum does not show the same symmetric distribution. Compare the examples from Mdm̄b̄α and Limbum below.

9a. **M̄d̄umb̄α:**

1. n̄c̄ãŋ “bottle”
2. b̄ă? “house”
3. n̄ts̄ə “water”

**Genitive**

- b. n̄c̄ãŋ n̄ts̄ə  
bottle water  
“a bottle of water”
- b̄ă? n̄c̄m̄í  
house mama  
“mama’s house”

**Possessive**

- b. n̄c̄ãŋ s-ǝm  
Bottle Agr-my  
“My bottle”
- b̄ă s-ù  
bottle Agr-your  
“your bottle”

Adapted from Kouankem (2010:136)

10a. **Limbum:**

1. f̄ũ: “leaf”
2. t̄f̄ē “tree”
3. r-k̄ì “pole”
4. nd̄āp “house”

**Genitive**

- b. f̄ũ: t̄f̄ē  
leaf tree  
« leaf of a tree”



r-kǐ    ndāp

Sg pole house

“the pillar of the house or the house’s pillar”

**Possessive**

fū:    yá

Leaf my  
“my leaf”

tjē    yá

tree my  
“my tree”

r-ŋkì    lá

poles my  
“my poles”

ndāp    yá

house my  
“my house”

From the constructions in Limbum and Mdm̄b̄ɑ above, we notice that as far as the possessive constructions are concerned, the tonal behaviors are not the same for both languages. While the Mdm̄b̄ɑ data shows clear signs of an associative floating tone which docks unto the next tone bearing unit on the left, the constructions with data from Limbum do not show such tonal changes. The tones remain unaffected.

Based on the forgone arguments, we hold to the fact that in Limbum, the pre-noun position for the possessive determiner is presentational, as such the neutral word order, while the post-noun position of the possessive determiner yields the derived structure. In the section that follows, I present an analysis of these construction types as would be done for typical Grassfield Bantu languages in the likes of Bafut and Mdm̄b̄ɑ in the light of Chomsky's (1995) Minimalist Program.

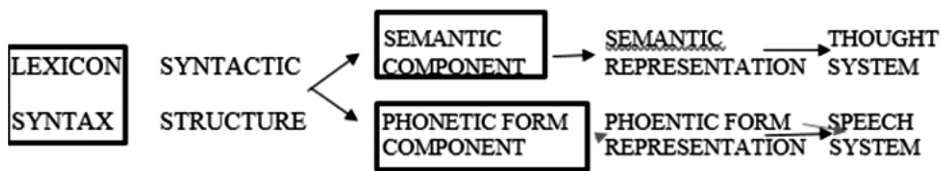
#### 4. Proposing an analysis

The following paragraphs handle an in-depth analysis of the Limbum data in line with Chomsky's Minimalist Program. The analysis here will not only be limited to Chomsky's proposal but we are going to, from time to time, have recourse to subsequent developments of this theory: the Split DP Hypothesis as proposed by Abney (1987) and taken up by Carstens (1991), Nkemnji (1995), Tamanji (1999) and others. The notion of Split Projections as proposed by linguists like Pollock (1989), Rizzi (1997), (2001), (2004) and subsequent works, Carsten (1991) and Heavy Pied-piping as proposed by Nkemnji (1995) and his followers. But before getting into the crooks of the matter, it is incumbent on us to give an overview of Chomsky's Minimalist Program, given the fact that it is within this theoretical framework that the ensuing discussions of our data will repose.

##### 3.1. The Minimalist Program

The skeletal form of Chomsky's(1995) Minimalist Program is shown as found on the figure below:

**Figure 1: THE MINIMALIST MODEL**



Adapted from Radford (2004:5)

In this model, the syntactic component contains the lexicon which is our mental dictionary. This has an entry of all the words of a given language. In the computation of syntactic structures, two operations are involved: Operation Merge and Operation Move. These entail the selection of the appropriate lexical items and putting them together (merge) in a pair wise manner until the operation is maximal (when a full phrase has been formed) Movement implies the displacement of an item or features from an original syntactic position (extraction site) to another position (landing site). Movement can either be overt in that an element is visibly displaced in the syntax or it can be covert in which case there is feature percolation. Movement must be motivated. In the model we are working with, the motivation for movement is feature valuation. According to Chomsky (1995), an element should move if only it must move otherwise, it should not

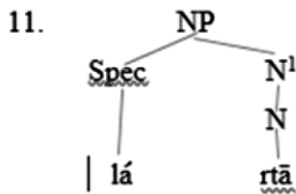
since movement is “costly”. Movement should be as a last resort.

As mentioned earlier, movement is triggered by the need to check features. Since features are valued in a C-Command domain, a “probe” with an interpretable feature beacons on a “goal” with a matching unvalued feature so it can be valued in the right configuration. Despite the fact that the Minimalist Program prohibits the use of traces based on the grounds that it involves an introduction of an item which was not there during the merger operation hence not upholding the fidelity of the Projection Principle, we shall however, for purposes of clarity in this paper, use the pre-minimalist terminology of traces.

The interface level comprises of the phonetic component and the semantic component. The phonetic component has to do with pronunciation: articulation or the speech system, while the semantic component is concerned with interpretation: the thought system. When features have been checked in the syntax, there is the spellout into these interface levels. If after valuation the results contain only interpretable features, then the derivation is said to converge (grammatical). In other words, only interpretable features should be visible at the interface levels for any grammatical construction. On the other hand, if after checking we still have some unvalued uninterpretable features at the interface levels, then the derivation is said to “crash” (ungrammatical). As seen from the above figure, Chomsky's Minimalist Program recognizes two components: the syntactic component and the interface levels.

#### **4.2. Data analysis**

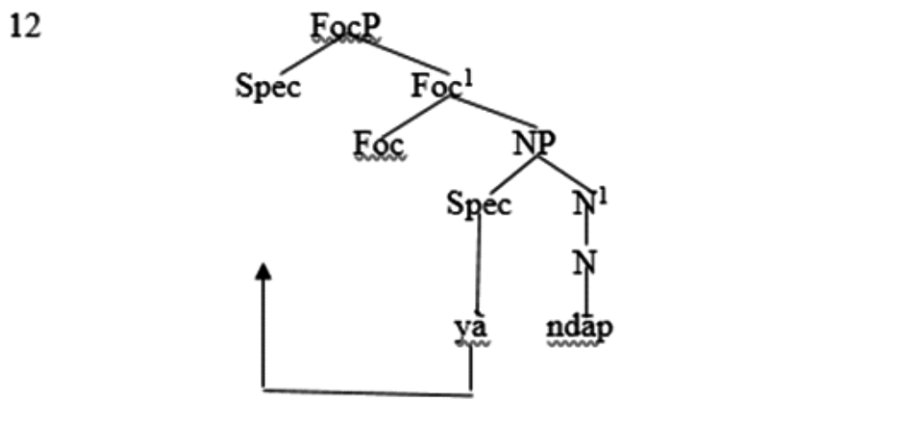
Limbum, being a Grassfield Bantu language still maintains some of the concord system observed for Bantu languages. With reference to the data which we have in (1) and two (2) above, if we adopt the traditional treatment of this type of groups of words as Noun Phrases, we will not face any problem in projecting them. This is because in the said constructions, we have a noun preceded by a possessive determiner. In such constructions where the possessive determiner is in a pre-noun position, the merger operation is straight forward in that the possessive will be hosted by the specifier node of the NP while the noun remains as the Head of the NP. The sentence in (1a) above will have the structure as (11).



This type of merger operation will produce a correct word order in Limbum but contrary to the interpretation which such a word order will yield for Bafut and Mdm̄b̄a:., emphasis is laid on the possessive.

The issue that is cause for concern with the Limbum data is that, the normal neutral word order that has been identified for grassfield Bantu languages: Tamanji and Tabe (ms), Kouankem (2010) is that which has the possessive determiner following the nominal. This is contrary to what obtains in Limbum. In this language, as argued above, the normal neutral word order for this construction type has the possessive determiner at a pre-nominal position while for purposes of contrastive focus, the possessive determiner follows the noun as captured by the constructions in (3) above.

In terms of the derivation, if we hold the same with Tamanji and Kouankem and assume that the neutral pre-nominal possessive is in Spec NP, for focusing purposes, we will have to project a Focus Phrase above NP. Such a projection will permit the focused possessive to move and incorporate into Spec of Foc<sup>0</sup> in order to check a focus feature found in the head of FocP in a Spec-Head configuration as schematized below:

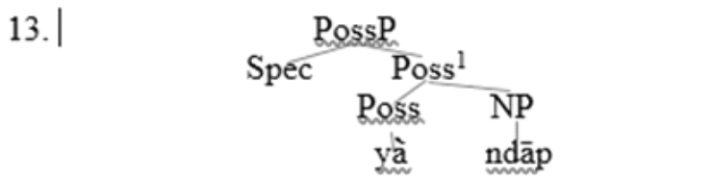


Such a movement is not at variance with the theory we have adopted here, since the element in Spec which moves, lands in a matching category (Spec to Spec Movement). After this, the Head of NP can either move to the Head of FocP (where features are checked in a Spec-Head configuration) or remains at its original site (in the latter case, features are checked by speculation). The only problem is that it will account for the data of languages like Bafut and Mdmba, given the fact that focusing is done when the possessive is found at a pre-noun position but will not account for the Limbum data since focusing is achieved by placing the possessive at a post-noun position.

### 5. Proposing an alternative analysis

Given the inability of the analysis proposed above to account for the Limbum data, I embark, in the following paragraphs, on proposing an alternative solution that will generate the Limbum construction. This new proposal is still within the Minimalist Program and its subsequent developments (Abney 1989, Carstens 1991, Nkemnji 1995).

An alternative analysis would be based on the grounds that the possessive in Limbum is exclusively associated with a possessive interpretation. This claim considers it as being independent from the nominal construction. This entails that in analogy with the philosophy of 'Split Projections' and within a theory which opts for the projection of functional categories into full phrases, we project a Possessive Phrase (PossP) with the possessive as its head selecting a nominal complement. This is schematized in (13) below:



The implication of such a representation as in (13) above is that the possessive is an independent construction out of the traditional NP. This type of structure projects the neutral possessive construction and not the focused type which has the noun at pre-possessive position. The situation further complicates when we have a focused possessive and a demonstrative determiner occurring in the same construction. If we assume a grammar where the possessive is generated in Spec NP, then we will be implying that the demonstrative is either a complement of N or is adjoined to NP. Such an analysis will not express the relationship that exists between the determiner

and the head noun. The constructions in (14b) and (d) below which are derived from the neutral forms in (14a) and (c) by focusing contain a post nominal possessive and a demonstrative determiner.

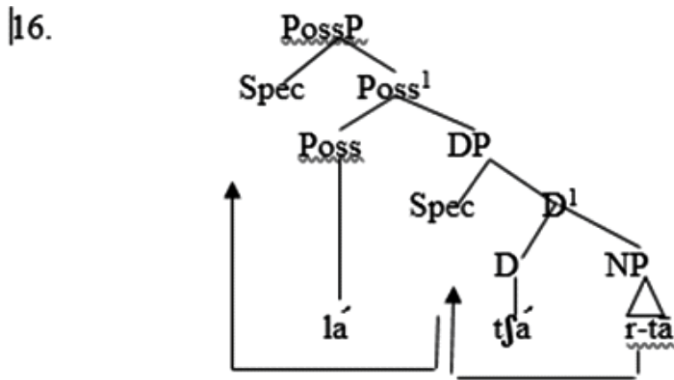
- |       |                         |         |       |
|-------|-------------------------|---------|-------|
| 14.a. | lā                      | rtā     | tʃā   |
|       | my                      | cap     | this  |
|       | "this my cap"           |         |       |
| b.    | rtā                     | lā      | tʃā   |
|       | Cap                     | my      | this  |
|       | "this cap of mine"      |         |       |
| c.    | wā                      | btʃèʔ   | btʃā  |
|       | my                      | clothes | these |
|       | "these my clothes"      |         |       |
| d.    | btʃèʔ                   | wā      | btʃā  |
|       | clothes                 | my      | these |
|       | "these clothes of mine" |         |       |

Considering the possessive and the demonstrative as determiners, as analyzed in traditional grammar, we will be hard put to generate these two elements which are not even contiguous. This is one of the reasons that motivated linguists like Abney (1987), Carstens (1991), Nkemnji (1995), Tamanji (1999), and others to propose that the traditional NP be reanalyzed as a DP with the determiner as its "head" and NP as its complement.

Adopting the DP Hypothesis as proposed by Abney (1987) and others, and projecting a PossP as proposed above, we will be able to generate the correct word order in Limbum. In this projection, the DP stands out as the complement of the Poss<sup>0</sup> and NP as the complement of D<sup>0</sup>. A question that might arise at this juncture relates to the hierarchical order between the determiner and the possessive. In fact, why do we project a PossP above the DP? Our reason for considering the DP as a complement of the possessive is simply because in Limbum, despite the fact that the possessive and the noun can interchange positions, we can never have a situation where a demonstrative determiner occurs to the left of the possessive. Hence, the demonstrative determiner and the noun entertain a much closer relationship that is not shared between the possessive and the noun. This restriction is the reason for the ungrammaticality of the construction in (15).

- 15.a. \*rtā tʃá lá  
 Cap this my  
 b.. \*tʃá rta lá  
 this Cap my  
 c... \*btʃè? btʃá wá  
 clothes these my

Based on the arguments above, we can propose that the focused phrase in (14b) can then be derived through the various movements that take place as in (16) below.

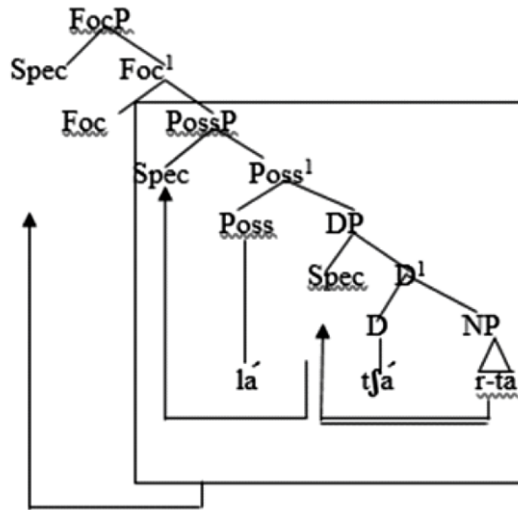


The derivation above is cyclic in the sense that the NP complement of  $D^0$  moves to Spec DP then, DP moves to its final landing site; Spec PossP.

Despite the fact that these movements give us the correct word order, the derivation does not give a focus interpretation to the possessive. In order for this construction to have its right interpretation as focus, in analogy with Aboh (2004) who uses the Gungbe data to prove that the left periphery of the DP has an articulate structure like the CP, we propose an analysis where there are no exceptions and say:

Just like the clausal (CP) and the DP left periphery, the left periphery of all phrases can be articulated like the clausal left periphery. In the light of this assumption, we project a Focus Phrase in the left periphery of PossP as we find in the structure below:

17.

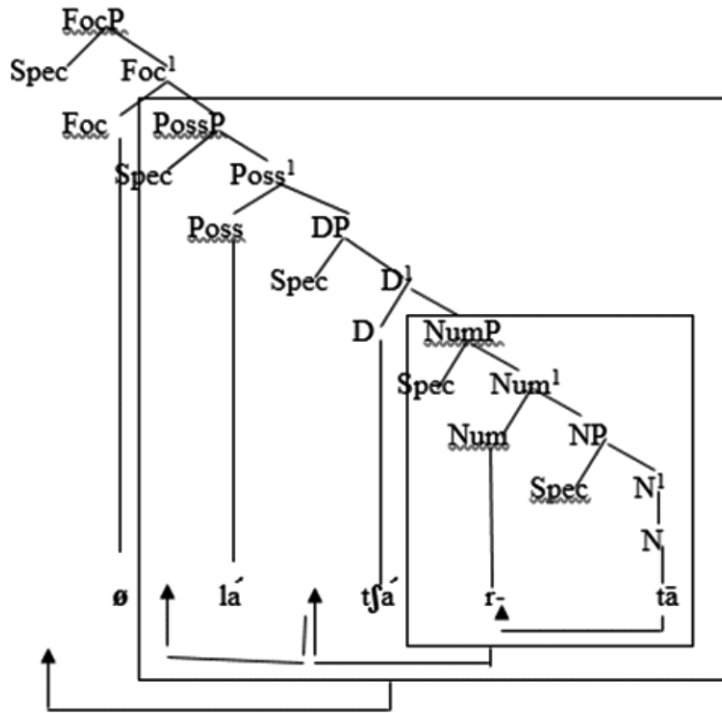


The NP first moves to Spec DP and then to Spec PossP. For the construction to have a focus interpretation, all of PossP is pied-piped to the Spec of FocP where it checks a focus feature contained in the head of FocP: Heavy Pied-piping.

This analysis does not solve the problem entirely. Looking at the structure of the noun, we realize that it is a complex noun, composed of a class prefix and the root. The Split DP Hypothesis as discussed in Carstens (1991), Nkemnji (1995), Tamanji (1999) and others, gives us a possibility of projecting the noun class prefix as a functional projection. In this regard, we project a number phrase as the complement of  $D^0$  with NP as the complement of its head  $Num^0$ . This way, it is the head of NP that moves to  $Num^0$  and gets affixed to the noun class prefix. This movement is justified in the sense that the element found in  $Num^0$  is affixal in nature (a bound morpheme). This noun incorporates into the Head of NumP where it is attached to the class marker before onward movement. Let us look at this concretely in the tree diagram below:

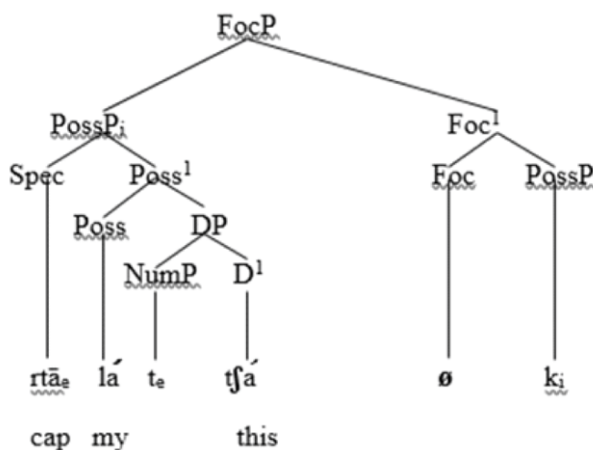


18.



In this derivation, the root noun which is base-generated in  $N^0$ , moves to  $Num^0$  where it cliticizes with the affixal head of NumP and checks its class features. Given the fact that the determiner is noun class dependent, it means it attracts NumP which then moves to Spec DP in order for the concord features to be checked in a Spec-Head configuration. In a normal (neutral) possessive construction, there is no further movement. But in the case where there is focus, the entire PossP moves to Spec FocP so that the phonetically null Focus feature found in  $F^0$  is checked in the appropriate configuration. The above derivation yields the structure in (19) below:

19.



## 5. Conclusion

The analysis in this paper was geared towards a discussion of the variant word orders that obtain in constructions containing a NOUN and a POSSESSIVE. The Limbum data shows that there are two variant word orders: POSSESSIVE > NOUN and NOUN > POSSESSIVE. The analysis shows that contrary to the interpretation that is given to other Grassfield Bantu languages, the reverse is true for Limbum. This difference calls for a reanalysis of the Limbum data not only to derive the correct word order, but also to give it the interpretation that the different word orders translate to the native speakers of the language. This reanalysis beacons for a projection of a PossP for the neutral word order and a FocP as the topmost phrase in the case of contrastive focus. To derive the correct word order, where the possessive determiner occurs at a post nominal position and to achieve the right interpretation, recourse was sought from the process of Heavy Pied-pipping.

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*Gratiana Linyor Ndamsah, Ph.D*

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