
POSSESSION AND RELATIVITY IN JAPANESE GRAMMAR: A SYNTACTIC PERSPECTIVE

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Possession is a core grammatical concept found in all languages, but the way it is expressed varies widely. In Japanese, possession is primarily indicated using the particle の (no), which functions as a genitive marker, as well as through existential verbs like ある (aru) and いる (iru). Unlike Indo-European languages, which rely on possessive pronouns and verb-based possession structures, Japanese employs a more syntactic approach. This paper explores how possession is conveyed in Japanese, how it interacts with relative clauses, and how it differs from other linguistic systems.

INTRODUCTION. Possession is one of the most basic and essential grammatical functions in human language. Whether expressing ownership, relationships, or abstract belonging, all languages have some way of indicating possession. In English, this is done using possessive pronouns (*my, his, our*) or the genitive 's (*John's book*). Japanese, however, takes a different approach, using the の (no) particle to create a possessive relationship between two nouns. Additionally, instead of a direct equivalent to the verb *to have*, Japanese uses existential verbs like ある (aru) and いる (iru) to indicate possession.

This paper examines how possession is structured in Japanese, how it relates to noun modification, and how it compares to possession in Indo-European languages. By analyzing these features, we gain insight into the broader syntactic organization of Japanese and its differences from other linguistic systems.

2. How Possession Works in Japanese

2.1 The Role of の (no) as a Possessive Marker

The most common way to indicate possession in Japanese is through the **の (no)** particle, which functions similarly to the English apostrophe + s or the word *of*:

- **私の本 (watashi no hon)** – *My book*
- **田中さんの車 (Tanaka-san no kuruma)** – *Mr. Tanaka's car*
- **日本の文化 (Nihon no bunka)** – *Japanese culture*

This structure is simple yet versatile. **の (no)** essentially links two nouns, where the first noun (the possessor) modifies the second noun (the possessed item). Unlike English, which has separate possessive pronouns (*his, her, their*), Japanese simply adds **の (no)** after any noun or pronoun to create a possessive meaning.

2.2 Expressing Possession with **ある (aru)** and **いる (iru)**

Instead of using a verb like *to have*, Japanese relies on existential verbs to indicate possession. The choice of verb depends on whether the possessed item is animate or inanimate:

- **車がある (kuruma ga aru)** – *I have a car* (lit. "There is a car")
- **猫がいる (neko ga iru)** – *I have a cat* (lit. "There is a cat")

This structure might feel unusual to English speakers, as it frames possession as existence rather than ownership. Essentially, saying *I have a car* in Japanese is conceptually closer to saying *A car exists (for me)*.

2.3 The Absence of Possessive Pronouns

In many languages, possessive pronouns like *my, your, their* are distinct from regular pronouns. Japanese, however, does not have a separate set of possessive pronouns. Instead, possessiveness is shown by adding **の (no)** to personal pronouns:

- **彼の (kare no)** – *his*
- **彼女の (kanojo no)** – *her*
- **私たちの (watashitachi no)** – *our*

Because **の (no)** functions so broadly, this approach eliminates the need for an entirely separate set of possessive pronouns.

3. Possession and Relative Clauses

3.1 **の (no)** as a Modifier in Relative Clauses

Japanese does not use relative pronouns like *who* or *that*. Instead, entire phrases can modify nouns directly, often with the help of **の (no)**:

- **私**が書いた本 (**watashi ga kaita hon**) – *The book that I wrote*
- **彼**が作ったケーキ (**kare ga tsukutta keeki**) – *The cake that he made*

This structure makes Japanese relative clauses more flexible than in English, where additional words like *which* or *that* are required.

3.2 が (ga) in Possessive and Relative Structures

The subject marker **が (ga)** can also appear in possessive and relative constructions, often emphasizing the possessor's role:

- **田中**さんが持っている車 (**Tanaka-san ga motte iru kuruma**) – *The car that Mr. Tanaka has*

Here, **が (ga)** highlights the fact that *Mr. Tanaka* is the one in possession of the car, making the statement more explicit.

4. How Japanese Possession Differs from Indo-European Languages

Japanese approaches possession in a way that is fundamentally different from many Indo-European languages, particularly English.

- **No Separate Possessive Pronouns** – Instead of words like *his* or *their*, Japanese simply adds **の (no)** to the standard pronoun.
- **Existential Verbs Instead of “Have”** – Japanese expresses possession using verbs that indicate existence rather than direct ownership.
- **Relative Clauses Without Pronouns** – Instead of using words like *who* or *that*, Japanese structures relative clauses using verbs and particles like **の (no)**.

For learners of Japanese, these differences can be challenging at first, as they require thinking about possession in a structurally different way.

Conclusion

Japanese handles possession in a way that prioritizes syntax over separate word forms. The use of **の (no)** as a genitive marker, the reliance on existential verbs to indicate possession, and the absence of distinct possessive pronouns all contribute to Japanese's unique grammatical structure. Understanding these features is essential for both linguistic

analysis and second-language acquisition, as it highlights the diverse ways in which languages can organize fundamental concepts like possession.

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