The o/a distinction in Hawaiian possessives

The Hawaiian possessive system has challenged students and grammarians since the middle of the nineteenth century. The basic problem lies in predicting the correct choice between two forms, one containing the vowel o and the other containing the vowel a, as all Hawaiian possessive particles come in pairs. Thus the English word 'my' translates as either ko'u or ka'u, and the English word 'his' translates as either kona or kāna. Some words are regularly possessed with the o forms and others with the a forms. The following examples illustrate the o/a contrast:

ko'u hale  'my house'
ko'u makuahine  'my mother'
ko'u pōpate  'my hat'
ko'u iio  'my horse'
ko'u limu  'my hand'
ka'u imu  'my earth oven'
ka'u makau  'my fishhook'
ka'u keiki  'my child'
ka'u pu'a  'my pig'
ka'u haupia  'my coconut pudding'

This article deals with a portion of the category of possession: the o/a choice in the possession of tangibles. 'Tangible' is a term for lexical items that refer to concrete objects, such as pōhaku 'stone', i'a 'fish', and kamanā
'carpenter', or to objects that are believed to be concrete, such as 'whānau' 'spirit'.

References to the o/a contrast are readily found in grammatical studies of Polynesian languages, although the topic is rarely dealt with in depth. From previous descriptions it is possible to set up three basic formalizations of theories of Polynesian possessive marking. Although some descriptions are 'mixed', that is, have elements of more than one theory, most can be assigned principally to one or another of the three theories described below.

1. The Arbitrary Noun Class Theory. All nouns that can be possessed are arbitrarily assigned to one of two classes characterized solely by their choice of a possessive marker. Members of one noun class are possessed with o, members of the other class with a. There is no consistent correlation with meaning; that is, possessive marking is like the gender system of French or German.

This theory is refuted by the uniformity of possessive choice for items introduced since European contact into the various Eastern Polynesian languages. The post-contact history of these languages has been independent as far as possessive marking of nouns is concerned, but in languages as far apart as Maori, Easter Island, and Hawaiian, the terms for 'horse', 'airplane', 'swimming pool', 'sunglasses', 'lipstick', and 'umbrella' are all possessed with o, while the terms for 'goat', 'gun', 'stove', 'cigarette', and 'television' are all possessed with a. This identity cannot be explained as a coincidence; it must reflect semantic principles which are regular and productive in these languages.

2. The Feature-Based Noun Class Theory. All possessed nouns fall into one of two classes, the o class and the a class, according to semantic features which they possess. For example, portable property is assigned to the a class, and thus we can construct a semantic feature [PORTABLE] as one (not the only one) of the diagnostic features of class a; inherited property is assigned to class o, hence [INHERITED] is one of the semantic features diagnostic of class o. Some of the features which recur in descriptions based on this theory are listed below, together with positive and negative values showing their relationship to the possessive morphemes o and a.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semantic Feature</th>
<th>o</th>
<th>a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[IMPORTANT IN THE OLD CULTURE]</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[IN CLOSE CONTACT WITH THE BODY]</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[INHERITED]</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[PORTABLE]</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ANIMAL USED FOR RIDING]</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[SUBORDINATE TO THE POSSESSOR]</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The feature-based noun class theory is inadequate. The features proposed are not mutually exclusive, yet no hierarchy of importance has ever been proposed for them. For instance, a spear is + [IMPORTANT IN THE OLD CULTURE], + [IN CLOSE CONTACT WITH THE BODY], and + [INHERITED], all of which predict ə, but it is at the same time + [PORTABLE], and + [SUBORDINATE TO THE POSSESSOR], both of which predict a. In the absence of a workable hierarchy governing which marker must be chosen in cases of conflict, such as with a spear, this theory fails to make a unique choice. (‘Spear’ takes ə in Hawaiian.)

The features listed above also predict the wrong results in many cases for Hawaiian, as is shown below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ə Is Predicted by:</th>
<th>But ə Is Used to Possess:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+ [IMPORTANT IN THE OLD CULTURE]</td>
<td>poi pounder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ [IN CLOSE CONTACT WITH THE BODY]</td>
<td>food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ [INHERITED]</td>
<td>war club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>− [PORTABLE]</td>
<td>earth oven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>− [SUBORDINATE TO THE POSSESSOR]</td>
<td>teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a Is Predicted by:</th>
<th>But a Is Used to Possess:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>− [IMPORTANT IN THE OLD CULTURE]</td>
<td>bicycle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>− [IN CLOSE CONTACT WITH THE BODY]</td>
<td>fence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>− [INHERITED]</td>
<td>loincloth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ [PORTABLE]</td>
<td>ring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ [SUBORDINATE TO THE POSSESSOR]</td>
<td>subjects to their king</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The best evidence against the feature-based noun class theory, however, is the use of single lexical items with both possessive forms. Note the minimal pairs below:

- *ka‘u ki‘i* ‘the picture of me’
- *ka‘u hale* ‘my house (I live in)’
- *ka‘u ake* ‘my own liver’
- *ka‘u maka‘u* ‘my parent’

These examples show clearly that it is not sufficient to base the choice of possessive form solely upon the inherent semantic properties of the noun being possessed.

3. THE RELATION-BASED THEORY. The difference in meaning between the members of the pairs just given provides evidence for the relation-based theory. In this theory, there are no noun classes; rather it is the relationship between the possessor and the possessed that is characterized by ə and a, not the possessed item itself. The relation-based theory was proposed in the early grammars of Hawaiian. For example, Andrews (1854:45) wrote:
In the *Aui Pīlī* (Genitive Case) there is a nice shade of distinction between the meanings of the relations expressed by *a* and *o*; but there is no preposition in English that will give the shade of difference. They must both be expressed in English by the preposition *of*; and yet they are so distinct in a Hawaiian’s mind as rarely to be exchanged the one for the other.

Ten years later Alexander (1864:9) further specified this “nice shade of distinction,” stating that “*O* implies a passive or intransitive relation, *a* an active and transitive one.”

The following extract from Clark (1973:47) is one of the most recent statements of the relation-based theory in modern descriptions of Polynesian languages:

Occasionally the difference between *a* and *o* is described as being predictable from the head noun (for example Shumway 1971:265; Tryon 1970:26). This is simply untrue. Contrastive pairs such as the following can be found in all languages which distinguish *a* and *o*:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{MAO} & (2.59) & \text{te waiata a te tangata ra} & \text{“that man’s song (which he composed or sang)”} \\
& (2.60) & \text{te waiata o te tangata ra} & \text{“that man’s song (which is about him or concerns him)”} & \text{(Biggs 1969:43)}
\end{align*}
\]

As such examples clearly show, *a* and *o* are markers of relations between NPs. The terms “dominant” (*a*) and “subordinate” (*o*) are traditionally used, and characterize the distinction between the two as well as any two English words. *a* generally takes only human adjuncts, and indicates a relation of control or authority of the adjunct over the head. The relation indicated by *o* can perhaps best be characterized as covering all relationships not included in *a*.

The relation-based theory is potentially more nearly adequate than the two theories previously discussed in that it can account for the occurrence of a given noun with both *o* and *a* with a consequent difference in meaning. The characterization of this approach as presented above is not without flaws, however. The statement of relationships is not yet clear and it sometimes makes the wrong predictions. For example, a king dominates his subjects, and the relation-based theory as formulated by Clark wrongly predicts that a king will possess his subjects with *a*.

The earliest refinement to the relation-based theory of which I am aware was Albert J. Schütz’s characterization of the possessor’s control over the relationship itself as being the crucial factor. Schütz first mentioned this theory in the spring of 1973 in a class of which I was a member. A published statement by Schütz and Nawadra (1972:99), although originally intended to refer to Fijian, is applicable to Hawaiian as well:
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The choice between two types of possession is based on the relationship between the possessor and the possessed (note that these terms are grammatical and do not necessarily imply ownership in the strict sense). The basis of this choice is control, but not as it has been stated previously (Buse 1969:191). The domain of the control is the relationship, not the actual object, quality, or person being possessed. [A footnote refers the reader to Lynch 1974:10, in which a similar claim is made.]

We can readily show this view of possessive marking to be very useful in explaining what had appeared to be exceptions to the relation-based theory as proposed by Clark. For example, although a king dominates his subjects, he has no control (is not dominant) over the possession of subjects. ə marking is therefore correctly predicted.

There is a large class of exceptions in Hawaiian that cannot be accounted for by the claim that a possessor’s control of a relationship is the sole determining factor. An example is the possession of canoes. Although a possessor controls his relationship to the possession of a canoe, he possesses it with o, unlike other forms of property, which are possessed with a.

In an attempt to handle such exceptions, certain refinements to the relation-based theory can be proposed. Controlled (dominated) relationships are further specified as to the nature of the relationship. Relationships involving the spatial use of the possessed as what can be called a ‘location’ for the possessor are marked in Hawaiian with ə.

The adoption of these revisions of the relation-based theory allows one to formulate the following rules to predict the appropriate o/a choice for the possession of tangibles in Hawaiian:

1. Relationships which involve the use of the possessed by the possessor as a location require ə marking.

2. Relationships controlled by the possessor in which the possessed does not serve as the location of the possessor require a marking.

3. Relationships which are not controlled by the possessor require a marking.

Rule (3) predicts that inanimate things which have no control over being associated with other tangibles will possess with a. The following data are consistent with this observation:

nā hale ə Honolulu  ‘the houses of Honolulu’

nā i'ua ə ke hai  ‘the fish of the sea’

nā hua ə keia kumu  ‘the fruits of this papaya tree’

Humans and other animate beings have no control over the possession of certain things. Whether one possesses a body, along with its parts and excretions, is not subject to one’s will. For example:
Nor does one have control over the possession of members of the family one was born into or that of other persons that naturally accompany one's position in society. For example:

- ko'u lina  'my hand'
- ko'u pa'uawai  'my heart'
- ko'u tawo  'my hair'
- ko'u mimi  'my urine'

One also has no control over the possession of things associated with one through the agency of others. For example:

- ko'u inoa  'my name'
- ko'u ki'i  'the picture of me'
- ko'u mele  'my song (about me or dedicated to me)'

The lexical items listed above would be possessed with a by the person who controlled his relationship with them. For example:

- ka'u inoa  'my name (which I bestow on someone)'
- ka'u ki'i  'my picture (which I photograph or paint)'
- ka'u mele  'my song (which I compose)'

Relationships that a possessor causes, creates, or instigates are controlled by that possessor and require a marking. Therefore any individual with whom one develops a relationship through one's own will is possessed with a. For example:

- ka'u wahine  'my wife'
- ka'u haumana  'my student'
- ka'u malihini  'my stranger (used to mean a guest, a stranger one cares for)'

One instigates one's relationship to offspring and descendants by one's sexual activity. These relationships are marked with a. For example:

- ka'u keiki  'my child'
- ka'u mo'opuna  'my grandchild'
- ka lua o ka moa  'the chicken's egg'

The owner in a relationship of ownership is a controller. As ownership is controlled by the possessor, one would expect an owner to possess his property with a. The following data support that hypothesis:
A possessor creates a relationship of ownership with an object with some purpose or use of the possessed in mind. For instance, he may own food to eat it. He may own a box to keep other possessions in, or he may own a knife to clean fish with. In Hawaiian, one such use—the use of the possessed as a "location"—is grammatically marked. Anything that is owned with the intention of being used as a location is possessed with ə.

The term 'location' here has a use different from the customary one. Usually it refers to a place at which an object is situated, but here it is actually a broad characterization of intended uses by an owner. Location is a spatial use of an object. The goal of a possessor's use of an object as a location is the realization of a customary spatial relationship between the two. The following are some examples of things commonly used as locations:

- ko' u meena 'my mat'
- ko' u pena lehelehe 'my lipstick'
- ko' u māmalu 'my umbrella'
- ko' u pāpale 'my hat'
- ko' u halu 'my house'
- ko' u lii 'my horse'
- ko' u mokupani 'my island'
- ko' u lei 'my lei'
- ko' u uluna 'my pillow'
- ko' u pāpau he'e nalu 'my surfboard'
- ko' u wai lākini 'my perfume'

For example, a possessor has used a mat when he is sitting on it. A possessor has used lipstick when she has applied it to her lips. A possessor has used an umbrella when he is situated under it. A possessor has used a hat when the hat is on the possessor's head. A possessor has used a house when he is in the house.

A customary use of an object may involve some sort of a spatial relationship with the possessor and still not be considered as a location. If the attainment of the spatial relationship is not the ultimate goal of the possessor, but merely incidental to that goal, the use is not one of...
location, and thus a marking and not o marking is used. For example, a possessor has not used an adze by merely holding it in his hand; he must carve something with it. A possessor has not used soap merely by applying it to his body; he must scrub and then rinse the soap off. A possessor has not used a mirror merely by positioning himself in front of it; he must observe his image.

The nature of the possessed object does not necessarily preclude a particular use. A possessor may own clothing, not to wear (a locational use), but to sell (a nonlocational use). A possessor may own a flower, not to put in a vase (a nonlocational use), but to put over his ear (a locational use). As in Hawaiian, the possessor’s intentions are marked in cases of ownership in which the possessed serves as a location; that is, with o-particles being used instead of the a-particles that usually mark ownership, minimal pairs such as the following occur:

- ko’u lole ‘my clothes (to wear)’
- ko’u lole ‘my clothes (to sell)’
- ko’u pua ‘my flower (for the ear)’
- ko’u pua ‘my flower (to put in a vase)’

The origin of the o/a distinction. This fascinating possessive system, which marks not only the manner in which something came to be possessed but also the intended use of that thing, is not unique to Hawaiian. The same basic system is found throughout Polynesia, except in Niue and a few of the Polynesian Outliers. Moreover, there are many similarities between the possessive systems of the languages of Fiji and those of Polynesia, and it appears that the Polynesian (read ‘Hawaiian’ for ‘Polynesian’) possessive system derived from something very similar to that of standard Fijian.

Like Hawaiian, Fijian divides all possessive relationships into two types: those that are controlled by the possessor and those that are not. Again, like Hawaiian, controlled relationships are further specified for certain uses of the possessed by the possessor. There are two uses that are specified in Fijian: use for eating and use for drinking. The following charts illustrate the similarity between the Hawaiian and the Fijian possessive systems:

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HAWAIIAN
Possessive Relationships

 Controlled (o)    Not Controlled (e)
                     Possessed Used As Location (o)
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Fijian Possessive Relationships

Controlled (ma-) Not Controlled (ke-)

Possessed Used Possessed Used
As Food (ke-) As Drink (me-)

The idea of the importance of the use of location in the Hawaiian possessive system is a very recent one, first appearing in my thesis in 1976. Earlier descriptions of Polynesian languages using the relation-based theory tended to claim that there was only a two-way division: a marked controlled relationships and o marked noncontrolled relationships. This analysis predicted that Hawaiian o marking would always correspond to Fijian ke- marking (or suffixes; see n. 5). Our analysis, however, predicts that Hawaiian o marking will correspond to Fijian no- marking (for locations) as well as to ke- marking. In fact, Hawaiian o marking does correspond to no- as well as to ke- in Fijian, as is illustrated by the following examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fijian</th>
<th>Hawaiian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>na kequ i-taba</td>
<td>'the picture of me'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>na noqu tawa</td>
<td>'my canoe'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>na noqu rale</td>
<td>'my house'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>na noqu i-sulu</td>
<td>'my clothes'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>na noqu i-dabedabe</td>
<td>'my chair'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One could reconcile these data with the earlier analysis by claiming that the Fijian and Hawaiian world views differ. In the Hawaiian world view one would not control one's relationship to one's canoe, house, clothes, or chair, while in the Fijian world view one would. Explaining these data in this way is similar to creating arbitrary noun classes and therefore undesirable. One has to know the world view (read "memorize individual lexical items") before one can make the appropriate choice of possessive marking.²⁻⁶

Our analysis claims that the differences between the Fijian and Hawaiian possessive systems have a grammatical source rather than a cultural one. The analysis is therefore challenged to provide a link between the Polynesian system and the possessive system of an ancestor language that evidently closely resembled that of Fijian.

We can see that while the Polynesian system preserved the basic division between controlled and noncontrolled relationships, changes occurred in the types of controlled relationships that were specified.
The special marking of use for eating seems to have been lost. That for drinking still survives, however, in some Polynesian languages: for instance, Rarotongan. The irregular marking of ‘swa ‘the traditional kava drink’ with o in Hawaiian seems to be the fossilized remains of this earlier marking.?

If one accepts the theory that Polynesian languages further specify controlled relationships in which the possessed is used as a location, how does one explain the source of this marking? Fijian languages do not exhibit this phenomenon, nor do other closely related languages of Melanesia. This leads us to believe that the special marking of locational use in Polynesian languages is an innovation.

A possible source of this innovation is an analogical development involving the Proto-Polynesian particle *i, which marked the cause of a stative verb as well as location in Proto-Polynesian. Compare the following examples that illustrate the two uses of the Hawaiian reflex of *i:

\[ \text{Ua make ke kanaka i ka manu.} \]
\[ \text{perceptive dead the man ‘cause’ the shark} \]
\[ \text{‘The shark killed the man.’ or more literally, ‘The man died because of the shark.’} \]

\[ \text{Ua make ke kanaka i ka hale.} \]
\[ \text{perceptive dead the man at the house} \]
\[ \text{‘The man died at the house.’} \]

(The readings ‘The man died at the shark’ for the first example and ‘The man died from the house’ for the second example are also possible, although dependent on unusual contexts.)

The sufferer of a stative verb (such as make ‘dead’) has no control over his relationship to that which causes that state of being (such as manu ‘shark’, in the first example above). As such, a sufferer would always possess the cause of his state of being with o. As the markings of cause and location were identical in Proto-Polynesian, locations may have come to be possessed with o in the same way that causes were.

As a legacy of this development that occurred hundreds of years ago on a distant island to the southwest, today’s speaker of Hawaiian uses the o form of the possessives with moku‘ule‘e ‘airplane’ as well as with wa’a ‘canoe’, and with peleikena ‘president’ as well as a‘i ‘chief’, while using the a form of the possessives with both kalo ‘taro’ and ‘aitkalima ‘ice cream’. The familiar objects of daily life are no longer the same, but the framework in which they are viewed remains unchanged.
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Notes

1 My interest in Hawaiian possessives dates back to a paper I wrote for Dr. Elbert for a Hawaiian grammar class at the University of Hawaii in the spring of 1972. I eventually developed that paper into my M.A. thesis. Dr. Elbert had already done a considerable amount of research in the field of Polynesian possessives when I began my study. Two of his works, the notes on Hawaiian grammar of the Hawaiian-English Dictionary (1947) and 'The 127 Rennellese Possessives' (1965), were especially valuable to me as reference works.

2 Linguistics 770 (Areal Linguistics: Polynesian), conducted by Andrew Pawley at the University of Hawaii.

3 Ownership can be thought of as a mental relationship with some form of property, instigated by a thinking being. The owner creates this sense of possession in his mind, for one does not own something unless he thinks he does. A speaker assumes that animate beings other than himself are owners of objects when the circumstances of the relationships he observes appear similar to relationships of ownership he has experienced himself.

4 Pawley notes that complex possessive systems of the Polynesian and Fijian type are a characteristic of members of the Oceanic subgroup of Austronesian languages.

5 Fijian exhibits another phenomenon of possessive marking that seems completely unconnected to Hawaiian possession. Suffixes are attached to certain words, some of which involve relationships controlled by the possessor, such as 'spouse', and others which involve relationships that are not controlled by the possessor, such as 'mother'. Pawley notes that suffixes similar to those found in Fijian are found in other languages of Melanesia, where they are usually termed markers of inalienability. It appears that suffixes are used with terms that are difficult to imagine without the context of a possessor. Although there are some terms that definitely fit into this category and are marked with suffixes in almost all of these languages, it is difficult to determine exactly where to draw the line between terms that naturally require a possessor and those that do not. Consequently there is considerable variation among Melanesian languages as to which terms require suffix marking.

6 One would think that areas that have similar cultures and geographic settings, and that maintained contact with each other, would share similar world views and hence, possessive systems. Conversely, areas that have rather different cultures and geographic settings, which did not maintain contact, would develop different world views. We find, however, that this does not hold true within the area of our study. Languages spoken by culturally divergent and isolated peoples inhabiting radically different homelands (such as New Zealand, Easter Island, and Hawai‘i) have nearly identical possessive systems. Other languages spoken by culturally similar people inhabiting similar geographic settings who maintained contact before the arrival of Europeans (such as Fiji and Tonga) have rather different possessive systems.

7 Fossilized remains of the Oceanic possessive suffixes survive in Polynesian kinship terminology. For example, Hawaiian *apuna 'grandparent' reflects Proto-Oceanic *umpu 'grandparent' and -wa, the third person singular possessive suffix (A. K. Pawley, personal communication). The irregular use of a marking a few controlled relationships in Western Polynesian languages (such as Rennellese toku 'my son' and toku tara 'my spear') may reflect suffix marking in pre-Polynesian. The Eastern subgroup appears to have regularized such exceptions.
References