

# A comparison of differential adpossessor flagging and differential argument flagging

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## 1. Differential argument flagging

“differential object marking”: Bossong (1982; 1985; 1991; 1998)  
 (first mention of “differential case-assignment”:  
 Comrie 1977: 16)

- (11) **ENGADINIAN**  
*Barnard vaiva maridà a la figlia*  
 Bernard was+going marry DAT=ACC the daughter  
*d' ün fuorner rich*  
 of a baker rich  
 “Bernard was going to marry the daughter of a rich baker”  
 vs.  
*eu nu vōgl cha meis figl marida üna bastarda*  
 I NEG want that my son marries a bastard  
 “I do not want my daughter to marry a bastard”<sup>19</sup>

(Bossong 1991: 149)

universal generalization:

“If there is any semantic difference between an accusative marking ... and a nominative marking, this semantic difference will be related either to definiteness, or to animacy, or humanness or to degree of affectedness of the Object, with **the accusative ... marking the more definite** (rather than the less definite), **the animate** or human (rather than the inanimate or nonhuman), **and the totally affected** (rather than the unaffected) noun phrase.” (Moravcsik 1978: 283)

“differential subject marking”: de Hoop & de Swart (2009)

“differential case/argument marking”: Malchukov & de Swart (2009),  
 Witzlack-Makarevich & Seržant (2018)

Most of these works talk about **differential flagging** (= marking by adpositions or case). It seems that the notion of DOM was first extended to **indexing** by Morimoto (2002) (inspired by Aissen 2003).

Iemmolo (2013): *DOM* vs. *DOI*  
 (= differential object flagging vs. differential object indexing)

Witzlack-Makarevich & Seržant (2018: §3.2):  
 differential flagging vs. differential indexing

## 2. Differential adpossessor flagging (DPF)

no flag: inalienable possession (kinship and/or body-part terms)

genitive flag: alienable possession (others)

(cf. Haspelmath 2017)

(1) Abun (Bird's Head; Berry & Berry 1999: 77-82)

- a. *ji bi nggwe*  
I GEN garden  
'my garden'
- b. *ji. syim*  
I arm  
'my arm'

(2) Jeli (Mande; Tröbs 1998: 167-169)

- a. *Soma ra monbilo*  
Soma of car  
'Soma's car'
- b. *Soma bulo-ni*  
Soma arm-PL  
'Soma's arms'

(3) Lango (Nilotic; Noonan 1992: 156-157)

- a. *gwôkk à lócà*  
dog of man  
'the man's dog'
- b. *wì rwòt*  
head king  
'the king's head'

(4) Karo (Tupian; Gabas 1999: 148ff.)

- a. *maʔwìr at kaʔa*  
man of house  
'man's house'
- b. *aaro cagá*  
parrot eye  
'parrot's eye'

(5) Haida (isolate; Enrico 2003: 678ff.)

- a. *Bill gyaara daallraay*  
Bill of money  
'Bill's money'
- b. *Joe ʔaww*  
Joe mother  
'Joe's mother'

Differential adpossessor flagging is normally called differently,  
e.g. "alienability distinction" – but the similarities are striking.

### 3. Symmetric and asymmetric differential flagging

The great majority of cases of differential flagging are asymmetric, both in DOF and in DPF

Iemmolo (2013: 387)

“Asymmetric alternations, commonly referred to as DOM, are by far more common in the languages of the world (133 languages out of 157 in my sample).”

Iemmolo finds 26 cases of symmetric DOF, but it may be that his sample is biased toward these. E.g.

(6) Russian

- a. *On vypil molok-a.*  
he drank milk-GEN  
'He drank some milk.'
- b. *On vypil molok-o.*  
he drank milk-ACC  
'He drank some milk.'

There are very few languages showing symmetric differential adpossessor flagging, but an example is:

(7) Krongo (Reh 1985: 152; 317))

- a. *nūmò*      *má*-*Kùkkù*      (Genitive prefix)  
 mother      GEN-Kukku  
 ‘Kukku’s mother’
- b. *còori*      *kà*-*káaw*      *y-íkki*      (Possessive prefix)  
 house      POSS-person      M-that  
 ‘that man’s house’

Maybe also English: *Pat's dog*                      *Pat's sister*  
                                  *\*the dog of Pat*                      *the sister of Pat*    (e.g. Barker 2011)

#### 4. Functional motivation of asymmetric differential flagging: efficient coding

In asymmetric coding patterns that are cross-linguistically recurrent, we almost always find that zero marking occurs when the meaning is expected, while **the marker occurs when the meaning is unexpected**. This is efficient, and the general tendency may be explained by a causal **pressure for efficient coding**.

Two competing explanations:

- (i) ambiguity avoidance (e.g. Comrie 1977)
- (ii) differential marking of unexpected meanings (e.g. Haspelmath 2021)

The latter explanation (called “expectation management” in Haspelmath 2019: §8) is more general and explains some phenomena not explained by ambiguity avoidance (Haspelmath 2021: §11.3).

For example, differential object flagging may also occur when the subject is clearly marked ergative (as in (8) from Dyirbal), or when the nominal is already accusative-marked, as in (9) from Portuguese.

(8) Dyirbal

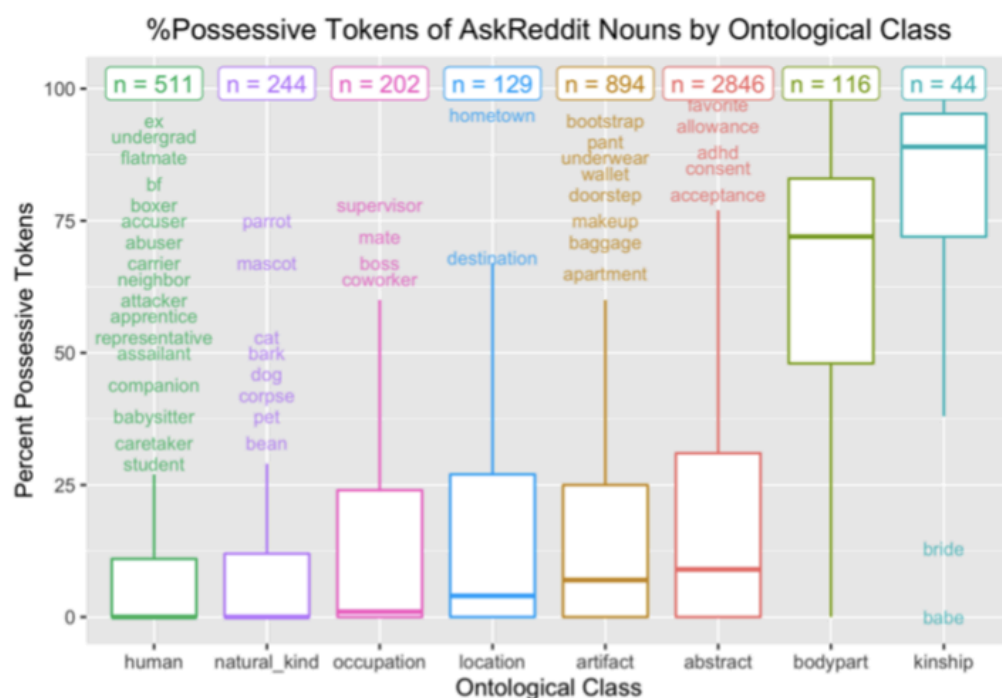
[*P* *ɲana-na*] [*A* *ɲuma-ɲgu*] *bura-n*  
 we-ACC father-ERG see-NONFUT  
 ‘Father saw us.’ (Dixon 1994: 130)

(9) Portuguese

*a mim* vs. *eu*  
 ‘me’ ‘I’

Differential adpossessor flagging is clearly motivated by the same factor: Possessedness is **highly expected for inalienable nouns** (kinship and body-part terms), and much less expected for **alienable nouns**.

Glass (2022): percentage of possessed occurrences (see also Haspelmath 2017):



Again, ambiguity avoidance can hardly explain differential possessor flagging, because in many languages, there is no relevant ambiguity, and juxtaposition can have only one meaning.

Compare:

(10) Lango (Nilotic; Noonan 1992: 156-157)

- a. *gwôkk à lócà*  
dog of man  
'the man's dog'
- b. *wì rwòt*  
head king  
'the king's head'

(11) Seychelles Creole (Michaelis & Rosalie 2013)

- a. *lakaz sa zonm*  
house that man  
'that man's house'
- b. *garson sa fanm*  
son that woman  
'that woman's son'

## 5. Two kinds of asymmetric differential coding in grammar: Split coding and divided coding

What's the difference between "differential coding" and "split coding"? Witzlack-Makarevich & Seržant (2018: 2) note:

The term *differential marking* – or to be historically precise, *differential object marking* (abbreviated as DOM) – was first used by Bossong (1982; 1985) in his investigations of the phenomenon in Sardinian and New Iranian languages. Somewhat older than this term is the term *split* (as in *split ergativity*) used in the line of research focusing primarily on the differential marking of the agent argument. It has been in use since Silverstein (1976) and was popularized by Dixon (1979; 1994).

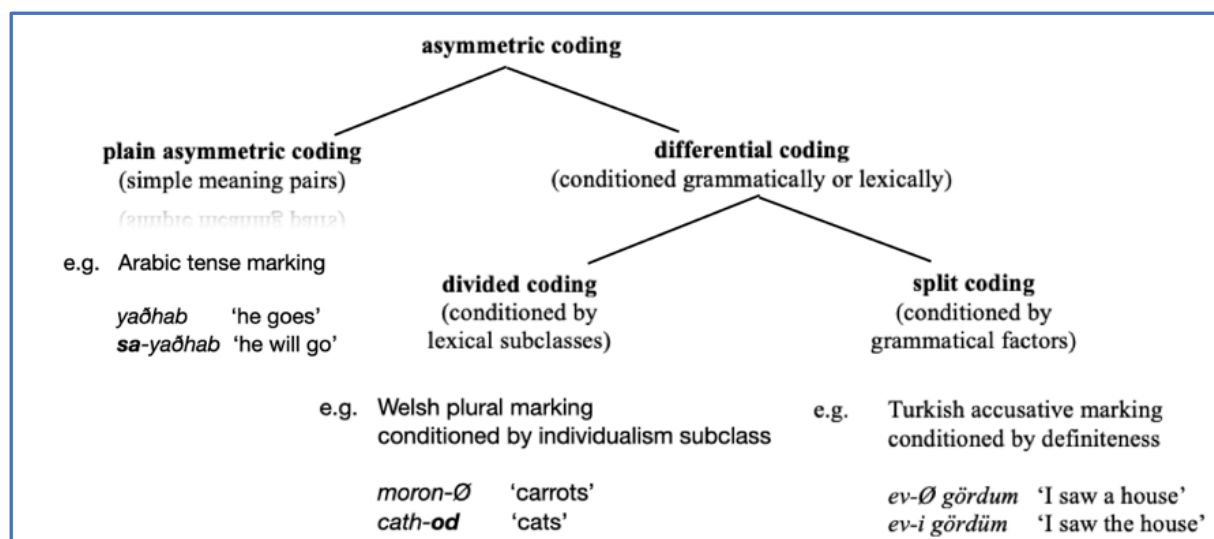
I propose that **split coding** is one subtype of differential coding:

variable coding that is conditioned by *grammatical factors*, e.g. definiteness

By contrast, when the differential coding is conditioned by lexical subdivisions,

I call it **divided coding**, e.g.

- inalienable vs. alienable nouns in possessor marking
- intransitive vs. transitive verbs in causative marking (e.g. Haspelmath 2016)
- individualist vs. gregarious nouns in singular/plural marking  
(e.g. Haspelmath & Karjus 2017)



Differential object marking (DOM) is split coding (when dependent on discourse factors such as definiteness) or divided coding (when dependent on inherent properties.)

In both cases, the marking depends on the properties of the coded element.

Differential possessor flagging (DPF) is divided coding: dependent on inherent properties of a subdivision of lexical items.

BUT:

The marking depends on **the properties of the other element**: the possessed noun.

This is like scenario-based flagging (or “coargument-sensitive flagging”),  
e.g. **special R coding conditioned by animacy of T** (Haspelmath 2021: §7.4)

In Icelandic, the preposition *fyrir* is required on the R when the T is animate, according to Siewierska & van Lier (2013: 194).

- (12) a. *Hann kynnti mér þessa gerð skáldsagna.*  
he.NOM introduced me.DAT this type fiction  
‘He introduced this type of fiction to me.’ (1 > 3, downstream)
- b. *Ég mun kynna þig fyrir henni.*  
I.NOM will introduce you.ACC to her  
‘I will introduce you to her.’ (3 > 2, upstream)

Actually, adpossessionive marking may also occur on the possessed noun rather than on the possessor (called **antigenitive** marking) – in this case, divided marking is perhaps a bit more intuitive. E.g.

- (13)
- |         | UNPOSSESSED      | POSSESSED<br>(antigenitive-marked) |                  |
|---------|------------------|------------------------------------|------------------|
| Koyukon | <i>tel-Ø</i>     | <i>se-tel-e'</i>                   | ‘socks/my socks’ |
| Achagua | <i>carru-Ø</i>   | <i>nu-caarru-ni</i>                | ‘car/my car’     |
| O’odham | <i>mi:stol-Ø</i> | <i>ñ-mi:stol-ga</i>                | ‘cat/my cat’     |
| Hausa   | <i>kàree-Ø</i>   | <i>kàree-n-tà</i>                  | ‘dog/her dog’    |

Note that antigenitive marking is not flagging; it can perhaps be compared to applicative marking on the verb.

Note also:

Different verbs often require different types of flagging, e.g.

*She found **Ø** the money.*  
*She looked **for** the money.*

This is typically treated in terms of **valency**, not in terms of differential object marking, although it could be said to be a type of **divided coding**.

## 6. The complementary patterns: Differential A flagging and differential possessed-noun marking

In quite a few cases, we observe complementary patterns: Two meanings are typically associated with two opposite conditioning factors, e.g.

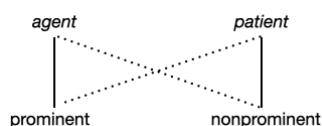


Figure 1

One type of prominence is animacy:



Figure 2

### (14) Universals

- a. If a language has asymmetric differential P flagging conditioned by animacy, **animate** nouns have a special accusative marker.
- b. If a language has asymmetric differential A flagging conditioned by animacy, **inanimate** nouns have a special ergative marker.

- (15) a. *My slyšali vetr-Ø.* (inanimate patient)  
 we heard wind-acc  
 'We heard the wind.'
- b. *My videli volk-a.* (animate patient)  
 we saw wolf-ACC  
 'We saw the wolf.'

- (16) a. *Volk-Ø*      *napugal*      *devočk-u.*      (animate agent)  
           wolf-NOM    scared            girl-ACC  
           ‘The wolf scared a girl.’
- b. *Gruzovik-Ø*    *oprokinulo*      *vetr-om.*      (inanimate agent)  
           truck-ACC    turned.over      wind-INS  
           ‘The wind turned over a truck.’ (Schlund 2020: 42)

		agenthood	
		AGENT	PATIENT
animacy	<i>animate</i>	<i>volk-Ø</i> wolf-AGENT (Nominative)	<i>volk-a</i> wolf-PATIENT (Accusative)
	<i>inanimate</i>	<i>vetr-om</i> wind-AGENT (Instrumental)	<i>vetr-Ø</i> wind-PATIENT (Accusative)

Figure 3

There is a similar complementary pattern with possessive constructions:

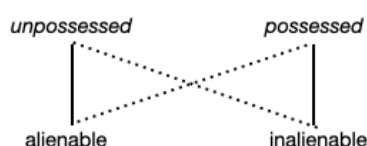


Figure 4

- (17) Universals
- a. If a language has asymmetric differential possessed marking conditioned by alienability, **alienable** nouns have a special *antigenitive* marker.
- b. If a language has asymmetric differential possessed marking conditioned by alienability, **inalienable** nouns have a special *depossessive* marker.

		possessedness	
		POSSESSED	UNPOSSESSED
alienability	<i>inalienable</i>	Koyukon <i>se-tlee'-Ø</i> 1SG-head-POSSD 'my head'	Koyukon <i>k'e-tlee'</i> DEPOSS-head 'head'
	<i>alienable</i>	Koyukon <i>se-tel-e'</i> 1SG-sock-ANTG 'my socks'	Koyukon <i>Ø-tel</i> UNPOSSD-sock 'socks'

Figure 5



## 7. Differential adpossessor indexing: A few examples

Hebrew (Glinert 2009)

- (18) a. *ha-bayit šel David* 'David's house'  
           the-house of David  
       b. *beyt-o šel David* 'David's house'  
           house-3sg of David

German (colloquial)

- (19) a. *das Fahrrad von Jürgen* ‚Jürgen's bike‘  
       b. *dem Jürgen sein Fahrrad* ‚Jürgen's bike‘

Toqabaqita (Oceanic; Lichtenberk 2009: 260)

- (20) a. *qaba-na wela*  
           hand-3SG child  
           ‚the child's hand(s)‘  
       b. *fanga wela*  
           food child  
           ‚the child's food‘

It is unclear whether adpossessor indexing can be said to be functionally similar to A and P indexing.

More research is needed.

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