ESSAY 4 · POSSESSORS AND BINDING

# Whose father? Possessor coreference as an inverse test

**2026-11-11 audit pass 4.** Copied examples: the essay builder dropped the first Navajo word of every example it copied from a working note (for example Witherspoon's *Hastiin łíį́' yiztał* showed as *łíį́' yiztał*, so each gloss sat under the wrong word). The words are restored exactly as the working note prints them; no form was changed. See the pass 4 report.

Grant Golland (research by Grok Bot) · 2026-10-27 · status: SOURCED data; D2 (deep vs shallow) OPEN

## Abstract

A possessive 'his' inside one noun phrase can refer back to the other participant only in one of the two voices. This looked like the binding evidence the deep-inverse question needed. Read first-hand, Aissen 1997 derives the same restriction by ranking alone, so the restriction fits any analysis in which the patient outranks the agent. This essay assembles the possessor data from Young & Morgan (via Aissen), Platero, Willie & Jelinek, Horseherder and Saxon, and shows why they lean toward structure without settling it.

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*Restated on the unified structure (2026-11-15): the possessor sits in the left specifier of the noun phrase and the possessor prefix is agreement; this essay's analyses are not yet restated. See https://navajo-decoded.grant-golland.workers.dev/unified-structure/#us-nominal (https://navajo-decoded.grant-golland.workers.dev/unified-structure/#us-nominal). The essay's data, judgments and citations are unchanged; it is kept as the record of what was argued then.*

## 2026-11-11 audit pass 2

Wording only: §3 said “In a VPISH tree”. VPISH is a hypothesis about where the subject is first merged, not a kind of tree, so it now reads “In a vP/TP tree”. The argument is unchanged.

## 1. The question

If *bi-* really raises the patient above the agent (Essay 3), the patient should be able to bind into the agent's phrase. Navajo has no quantifier-binding data for the inverse, but it has possessors. Do they decide the question, labelled D2 on the site?

## 2. The data

Young & Morgan's pair, as cited by Aissen 2000, shows that a "his" inside the acted-on phrase can point to the doer under *yi-* `SOURCED` : SOURCED

(1)

*’ashkii* *bi-lį́į́* *yi-yiiłtsą́.*

boy BI-horse YI-saw

Aissen 2000 (27a, b), citing Young & Morgan 1980:171. Copied from Who can "his" point back to under bi-? A possessor test for the deep inverse (T53a), ex. (1a).

(2)

**bi-lį́į́* *ashkii* *bi-yiiłtsą́.*

BI-horse boy BI-saw

Aissen 2000 (27a, b), citing Young & Morgan 1980:171. Copied from Who can "his" point back to under bi-? A possessor test for the deep inverse (T53a), ex. (1b).

(3)

**Bi-lį́į́* *ashkii* *yi-yiiłtsą́.*

BI-horse boy YI-saw

Aissen 2000 (29), citing Young & Morgan 1980:171. Copied from Who can "his" point back to under bi-? A possessor test for the deep inverse (T53a), ex. (2).

Platero (1978, page images) gives 'the boy's father saw him', with the boy coreferent, in the *bi-* form. The *yi-* form cannot have that reading SOURCED : SOURCED

(4)

*Ashkii* *bizhé'é* *yiyiiłtsą́.*

boy his:father see

Platero 1978:34, (1.57); 36, (1.62), (1.63); 37, (1.66) (page images checked, 130 and 400 dpi). Copied from What comes first decides: Platero 1978 on who "his" can mean, and a no-movement route to W&J (70b) (T59a), ex. (1).

(5)

*Ashkii* *bizhé'é* *biiłtsą́.*

boy his:father bi:see

Platero 1978:34, (1.57); 36, (1.62), (1.63); 37, (1.66) (page images checked, 130 and 400 dpi). Copied from What comes first decides: Platero 1978 on who "his" can mean, and a no-movement route to W&J (70b) (T59a), ex. (2).

Willie & Jelinek's (70) has the owner's name inside the doer's phrase:

(6)

*t'áá* *'ałtso* *Jáan* *ba-'ákchíní* *dabiiłtsą́*

just all John 3POSS-children PL-3ACC-3NOM-saw

a. '[All John's$_i$ children]$_j$ saw him$_k$.' b. * '[All John's$_i$ children]$_j$ saw him$_i$.'

Willie & Jelinek 2000:276–278, (70), (71), (77). Copied from Fourth person: escape from the animacy scale, ex. (70).

## 3. The argument

A deep inverse predicts this pattern SOURCED HYPOTHESIS : SOURCED

- A "his" inside the doer's phrase can point to the person acted on only under *bi-*. HYPOTHESIS
- A "his" inside the acted-on phrase can point to the doer only under *yi-*.

Platero's coreference rule is precede-and-c-command, with NP and PP as boundaries. It predicts the star on W&J (70b) with no plural condition. In a vP/TP tree, (70b) separates "the patient ends up above and before the doer's phrase" (deep *bi-*, or a null topic) from shallow *bi-* with no topic HYPOTHESIS . HYPOTHESIS

Saxon's analysis makes the *bi-* landing site A-like by her own criteria. That favours deep *bi-* plus Condition C over a null A′ topic HYPOTHESIS . HYPOTHESIS

## 4. Counter-evidence

**Aissen 1997.** Read first-hand, Aissen 1997 derives the same owner-outranks-owned gap in Fox, Cree, Ojibwe and Tzotzil by ranking alone. She argues against c-command accounts. The site's earlier verdict POSS-5 ("fits deep") is therefore downgraded to GAP-4: the data fit any analysis in which the patient outranks the agent HYPOTHESIS . HYPOTHESIS

**The examples use names.** None of the examples uses 'every', so none is a true binding test OPEN . OPEN

**The sources conflict.** Platero (3.18) and Young & Morgan (29) disagree on a coreferent owner inside the doer's phrase under *yi-* SOURCED OPEN . SOURCED

**Horseherder's possessor *yi-*.** - It needs a third-person antecedent and a different third-person doer that c-commands it. - It is out when the doer is 'I', 'you' or plural. - Ranking predicts everything except the plural block, and plural doers are also where W&J (70b) departs from ranking. - No quantified antecedents are tested SOURCED HYPOTHESIS . OPEN HYPOTHESIS

## 5. Status

> D2 moves from "no data" to "fits deep, not decisive" OPEN . A new test has been proposed but not found in any source: owner *yi-* on the doer's phrase under *bi-*. OPEN
> Deep predicts ✓ and shallow predicts * OPEN . OPEN

## References


1. Aissen, Judith 1997. On the syntax of obviation. Language 73(4): 705–750. OPENED
2. Aissen, Judith 2000. Full RTF with footnotes (cites Young & Morgan 1980). OPENED
3. Young & Morgan 1980. As cited by Aissen 2000. NOT OPENED
4. Platero, Paul 1978. Dissertation (page images). OPENED
5. Willie, MaryAnn & Eloise Jelinek 2000. Navajo as a discourse configurational language. OPENED
6. Horseherder, Nicole 1998. A Binding-Theoretic Analysis of Navajo Possessor yi-. M.A. thesis, UBC. DOI 10.14288/1.0088584. https://doi.org/10.14288/1.0088584 (https://doi.org/10.14288/1.0088584) OPENED
7. Saxon, Leslie 2003. WECOL 2001, vol. 13. OPENED


Working notes behind this essay: Who can "his" point back to under bi-? A possessor test for the deep inverse (T53a), Where the owner's name sits: Aissen 1997 read first-hand, and a Navajo sentence the ranking rule gets wrong (T57d, T57a), One "his", two third persons: Horseherder 1998 on the owner prefix yi-, and a plural doer that breaks it (T58f, T58a), What comes first decides: Platero 1978 on who "his" can mean, and a no-movement route to W&J (70b) (T59a), Two ways to put the object first: Saxon 2001 on bi- inversion vs Focus Movement, and whether the fronted patient sits in an A-position (T60c).

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