

NAIROBI EVANGELICAL GRADUATE  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

*Alienable and in Alienable Possession in Dholuo*

BY  
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*A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate School in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts in Translation Studies*

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Student's declaration

ALIENABLE AND INALIENABLE POSSESSION IN DHOLUO

I declare that this is my original work and has not been submitted to any other College or University for academic credit.

The views presented herein are not necessarily those of the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology or the Examiners.

(Signed)

  
Emese Lang

July, 2007

## ABSTRACT

In his book *A Grammar of Kenya Luo (Dholuo)* (1993) Tucker explores the different types of genitives he found in the language. He attempts to differentiate between alienable and inalienable genitive constructions, basing his argument on the different forms of genitive head noun in Luo. However, after thorough investigation, it can be said that Luo does not have the semantic distinction of alienable and inalienable genitives. It does have two different forms of genitive construction but these have no difference semantically. The difference between Tucker's findings and those in this document may be due to recent language change, but this would need further investigation.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

C	consonant
NP	noun phrase
obs	obstruant
son	sonorant
V	vowel
PST	past tense
PRF	perfect aspect

# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Language Background

Luo (or Dholuo) belongs to the Nilo-Saharan greater language family and in descending order to the following sub-families: Eastern-Sudanic, Nilotic, Western, Luo, Southern, Luo-Acholi. The most closely related languages to it are under the Luo subcategory, many of them from Sudan. Northern Luo: Anuak, Bor, Jur, Burun, Maban, Shilluk, Thuri, Pãri – these languages are all found in Sudan; and Southern Luo: Adhola, Kuman, and three Alur-Acholi languages, all in Uganda. Dholuo is the only language in the Luo family that is found in Kenya. There are a substantial number (280,000) of Dholuo speakers in Tanzania as well. (Gordon 2005).

Adhola is the most intelligible to Dholuo speakers, and according to Tucker (1993, 12) it can even be considered a dialect of Dholuo. The other related languages in Sudan are not intelligible to Dholuo speakers (Tucker 1993, 12).

The Luo people live mainly on the coast of Lake Victoria, in Nyanza province, Kenya. Their primary livelihood is fishing (Gordon 2005). There is also a large Luo community in the Kibera slum area in the middle of Nairobi.

## 1.2 Sources of Data

Since I am not a native speaker of the language I had to obtain my data from other sources. I used Tucker's *A Grammar of Kenya Luo (Dholuo)* as a written resource.

For the oral data I relied mainly on Elizabeth Adhiambio, a native Luo speaker, who has been my primary language helper in writing this project. She is 21, was born and grew up in Kombewa, near Kisumu. Both her parents were native speakers of Luo. I got some help from Elly Gudo, my colleague and his wife Caroline, both speakers of Luo. Caroline is 31, she was born and grew up in Kisumu, and both her parents were native Luo speakers. Elly is 35, was born and grew up in the Nandi hills, which is a Kalenjin area in Rift Valley Province. His parents were also mother tongue Luo speakers. These language consultants use the Kisumu dialect.

The data I used is mostly elicited because of the nature of my topic, where I had to systematically compare constructions of possessive genitives in strictly specified categories of the language.

### 1.3 Previous Works

Unfortunately very little has been done on alienable and inalienable possession in Dholuo, or any of the Nilotic languages for that matter. Tucker writes about it in his discussion of the genitive construction (Tucker 1993, 189), with a substantial amount of data, but focusing more on the phonological characteristics of the constructions.

For the purposes of my research I had to do a more systematic analysis of the phonological data than Tucker. I also wish to concentrate more on its semantic aspect, which Tucker does not deal with in depth.

## 1.4 Statement of the Topic

Certain languages make a distinction between possessions that are close to the possessor and usually can't even exist without the possessor, (i.e. dependent possessions), and possessions that can exist without a possessor (independent possessions) and are further removed from it. This distinction is commonly called inalienable versus alienable possession in the literature. I assumed, based on Tucker's findings, that Dholuo had this distinction - as it also has two types of genitive construction which are distinguished phonologically for most nouns - and I set out to attempt to prove my hypothesis in this paper. Furthermore, since the different languages with this distinction have different semantic categories for inalienable possessions, upon proving this distinction in Dholuo I was going to endeavor to distinguish the different categories of inalienable possessions in this language. However when I was able to obtain more and more data I started to have doubts whether this distinction is still there in Dholuo even if it has been in the past. So as I examined the data I had (keeping in mind that it came from quite restricted resources), I saw that I would not be able to prove my original hypothesis. So in this paper I am going to present the data I found and show that Dholuo does not have the distinction of alienable and inalienable possession. There is only one category,

kinship terms, where there is obligatory possession: kinship terms cannot stand alone without the possessor.

Because of limited time and resources I was not able to do further research into the historical development of the language. However this would be a very interesting and useful investigation to discover how Dholuo changed over time in its structure.

It would be particularly informative to find out whether there has ever been the distinction of inalienable and alienable possessions in other categories of the language, or the change in form of the possessum is due to some other phonological or morphological reasons. For this, one would have to examine proto-Dholuo to see how possessive constructions were formed a long time ago.

### 1.5 Significance of the Topic

Looking at Tucker's data from 1993 and comparing it with the data I gathered I can see some significant differences in the way possessive constructions are formed. It is hard to decide whether the differences are due to language change or my restricted resources. But my speculation is that the language is going through change and it is seen even in the possessive constructions, particularly in regards to inalienable and alienable possessions, as I am going to show in this paper.

