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The Unextractability of English Possessive Pronouns: On Portmanteau Morphology and the Timing of Spell-Out

For many English speakers, wh-movement of a possessor requires pied-piping of the containing possessed DP (1):

1. Mary is the author [CP [DP whose new book]₁ they said [TP t₁ is good]]. (Possessor pied-pipes possessed DP)

However, Davis (2020, 2021) shows that about half of speakers also permit possessor extraction configurations, in which long-distance wh-movement or topic/focus fronting separates the possessor from the Saxon genitive morpheme ['s] as in (2):

2. Mary is the author [CP who₁ they said [TP [DP t₁'s new book] is good]]. (Possessor extracted from possessed DP)

Based on a new study of 17 speakers who are typically capable of possessor extraction as in (2), I show that such movement has an un-noticed restriction. Though 14/17 speakers accepted possessor extraction of a full DP by topic/focus fronting (3), all rejected extraction of possessive pronouns like *my*, *our*, *your*, etc. (4):

3. I don't think John's cat is particularly cute, but Mary₁, I've always said [t₁'s cat] is really adorable. (Possessor extracted by topic/focus fronting)

4. * I don't think John's cat is cute, but our₁/your₁, I've always said [t₁ cat] is really adorable. (Pronominal possessor can't be extracted by topic/focus fronting)

I argue that such elements are immobile because they are portmanteau morphemes which express a non-constituent unit—a possessive D and the possessor in its specifier—via morphological *spanning* (Bye & Svenonius 2012, Merchant 2015, Svenonius 2016, a.o.). Further, I argue that this finding entails that phase spell-out applies to entire phases at once (Fox & Pesetsky 2005, Ko 2014, a.o.).