In Tlingit, it appears that alienable possessors and inalienable possessors occupy different syntactic positions, with inalienable possessors being closer to the possessum than with alienables. For example, a Tlingit speaker says my two knives, but two my fingers.

I argue that this surface difference reflects a real structural difference, as modeled by Saxon and Wilhelm (2016) for Tȟéȟáächt’á (Dogrib) and Dënesųłí’né (Chipewyan), two Northern Dene languages related to Tlingit. Saxon and Wilhelm suggest that inalienable possessors are compliments, while alienable possessors are specifiers of the “possessed noun suffix” that appears on alienably possessed nouns.

The prediction of this model, that inalienable and alienable possessor positions should be able to be filled at the same time, is shown to be plausible for Tlingit. Accordingly, I also argue, contra Españól-Echevarría (1997), that inalienable possessors do not need to be considered specifiers, and that the view that this is common or a default is not plausible if one considers Tlingit or languages like it.