

POSSESSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN SOME ARABIC DIALECTS WITH REFERENCE TO ENGLISH: A COGNITIVE GRAMMATICAL STUDY

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Abstract

This study is a syntactic-semantic analysis of possessive constructions in a number of dialects of the Arabic language. The dialects under study include the Iraqi Arabic dialect, some of the Arabic dialects in the Arab Gulf, and the classical Arabic dialect. However, occasional references are made to some other Arabic dialects whenever deemed necessary. Different possessive constructions in different dialects of Arabic are used as non-literal devices for conveying some notions that have nothing to do with 'possession'. The paper analyses the formal aspects involved in the construction of the notion of possession in individual dialects, i.e. the syntactic structure of possessive constructions, together with their semantic and/or cognitive semantic value(s), from a comparative perspective.

The approach adopted in the analysis of these phenomena is both linguistic than conceptual. It is supported by the underlying assumption that linguistic possession does not always presupposes notional possession.

After comparative description and analysis of the above-mentioned dialects, it appears that different possessive structures are utilized as alternative devices for the construction of otherwise too abstract concepts to understand. Morphosyntactically speaking, there also seems to be a strong tendency in Arabic possessive constructions toward a shift from standardised and synthetic structures to a more dynamic and analytic construction. The analytic markers of the resulting structures are perhaps the result of a substratum and progressive language contact.

1. Introduction

This study analyses several elements that are related to the notion of possession and the various strategies of its formation in a number of Arabic dialects. Then the semantic value of each strategy is provided. It proposes the beginning of a linguistic formalisation of possessive structures from a comparative perspective, taking as database linguistic structures belonging

to the Iraqi dialect, the dialects of the Arab Gulf, and the classical Arabic dialect. It should be noted that the study does not in any case completely bring out all the diverse aspects of possession, be they conceptual or linguistic in nature (see Guella, 2012).

In linguistics, the notion of possession is considerably unclear. This is not the place to propose a whole ‘grammar of possession’, as Gueron and Zribi-Hertz (1998) do, or to solve all the problems involved in the different categories of possession, in the delimitation of its domain, or the different kinds of differentiation into inalienable vs. alienable possession. The approach adopted in this study attempts to integrate structural syntax and cognitive grammar (in sense of cognitive syntax and cognitive semantics) in a loose way (see Partee & Borschev, 1998). It incorporates the idea that linguistic possession does not always presuppose notional or conceptual possession. This is the reason why only a few linguistic structures of possession are treated in this study.

Linguistic possession represents a relationship between a ‘possessor’ and a ‘possessed’. Syntactically speaking, possession is a relation between two nominals, without the mediation of a verb. Verbs of possession, which also contribute to the expression of possession, are excluded from this study. However, for illustrative purposes, the strategy representing their realisation will be exhibited in the form of ‘NVN’, especially in the case of indicating the English counterpart. This is to show its place in the classification covering the domain of possessive constructions in Arabic dialects. What follows exhibits the different structures serving the expression of possession in this cross-linguistic study. These structures have been isolated from fieldwork, or drawn from the vast amount of classical and modern literature in the Arabic language area (cf. Cantarino, 1974/1975; Cohen, 1968; Corriente, 1977; Ferguson et al., 1961; Harrell, 1962; Johnstone, 1967; Mitchell, 1962; Monteil, 1960; Piamenta, 1966, etc.).

2. Possessive Structures in Arabic

2.1 Possessed + Possessor

The first structure presented here is that referred to in the literature as the ‘construct state’ (cf., e.g., Beeston, 1970; Gaudefroy-Demombynes & Blachère, 1952; Wright, 1967). In this strategy, illustrated below by examples from Iraqi Arabic, two nouns follow each other in a relation expressing possession or association:

- (1) Siyyarat ahmad (Ahmed’s car)
 Possessed Possessor

This construction cannot be mediated by any word. In the presence of an adjective qualifying the possessed, it must be placed after the possessor, e.g.

- (2) siyyarat ahmad ijjideeda (Ahmed's new car)
 Possessed Possessor Adjective

When two or more nouns follow the first noun, only the last substantive, which is the possessor, is marked by determinacy or definiteness (also see Guella, 1983):

- (3) baab bet (a door of a house)
 Possessed (indefinite) Possessor (indefinite)

- (4) baab bet ilharis (The door of the guard's house)
 Possessed Noun Possessor (definite)

- (5) bit ibn ilrayyis (The president's granddaughter)
 Possessed Noun Possessor (definite)

- (6) haris baab bet wazeer (A minister's gatekeeper)
 Possessed Noun Noun Possessor (indefinite)

In (3), (4), and (6), there is not any notion of possession. The four are more descriptions of the head nouns. The holds true in English, as evident in the English translation. In (5), a quite different relation holds between the possessed and the possessor, the former being the granddaughter of the latter. In (3) and (6), it is worth noting that when the possessor is indeterminate, or is suffixed pronominally, the definite article marking possession disappears.

2.2 Possessor + Possessed

Before coming to the Arabic realization of this pattern, it is worth noting that the majority of English possessive constructions fall into this category. Both formalist and functionalist grammarians, in the course of accounting for the meanings of possessive constructions in English, merely provide the phrasal or sentential analogues of such constructions (see, e.g., Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973, p. 95). The following are some representative categories of meaning assigned to possessive constructions of this type:

1. **Possession**, e.g. My son's wife = My son has a wife.
2. **Subjective-Verb Relation**, e.g. His parents' consent = His parents' consented.

3. **Objective-Verb Relation**, e.g. The boy's release = Someone released the boy.
4. **Origin**, e.g. The girl's story = The girl told the story.
5. **Description**, e.g. a women's college = a college for women.
6. **Measure**, e.g. ten days' absence = The absence lasted for ten days.
7. **Apposition**, e.g. the city of York = York is a city.

In classical Arabic and various other dialects in the Arab Gulf (including Iraq), many nouns or particles are used in combination with substantives to denote the idea of possession, geographic/ethnic origin, companionship, etc. These are usually possessive expressions beginning with words like 'abu' (male owner of; literally meaning 'father of'), 'um' (female owner of; literally meaning 'mother of'), 'thu' (of), 'ahl' (people of or owners of), 'sahib' (a person of or an owner of), etc.

This structure is found almost in all the Arab Gulf dialects. Three cases can be distinguished in this structure:

2.2.1 abu, um, etc. + Possessed

(7) abu ilmahal (The owner of the shop)

(10) ahl ilbet (The owners of the house)

The two examples above reveal that ownership is conceptualised in terms of family relations, the owner (possessor) being the father or mother of the thing(s) possessed. Cognitive semantically speaking, this is part of our the way we conceive of the world around us. Human beings often conceptualise a less familiar abstract concept, ownership in this case, in terms of a more familiar abstract one, family relations (see Albayati, 2012, p. 331).

It must be noted that the constructions 'abu + Possessed' and 'um + Possessed' are also largely used as forms of address, e.g.

(11) abu hamza (The father of Hamza)

(12) um hamza (The mother of Hamza)

This construction is also used, in reduced forms, in the Iraqi dialect to convey a meaning of possession of a feature or characteristic, e.g.

(13) abu shuwarib (A man with a big moustache)

2.2.2 Possessor + **abu, um, etc.** + Possessed

This case is an extension of the previous case and is largely applied in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Arab Gulf to convey a notion of specific possession, or possession of a special feature or quality. Thus the following example is more an example of a demonstrative possession than anything else:

(14) *ilsayyara um babeen* (The car with two doors)

Holes (1984) indicates that ‘abu’ and ‘um’ are normally used with a feminine possessed and a masculine possessed, respectively. He (op. cit., p. 240) states that this is ‘a strange fact of grammar’. To substantiate his claim, he (loc. cit.) provides the following examples:

(15) *musajjila (Feminine Possessor) um (Feminine Particle) mikrofon thabit (Masculine Possessed)* (A recorder with a fixed microphone)

(16) *zaid (Masculine Possessor) abu (Masculine Particle) uyoon zurig (Feminine Possessed)* (Lit. Zaid, the owner of blue eyes)

It should be noted that this claim of Holes (1984) is not accurate, as a considerable number of other examples from the Arab Gulf dialects can demonstrate concord in terms of gender between ‘abu’ and ‘um’ and the possessed, as evident in the following example:

(17) *dulab (Masculine Possessor) abu (Masculine Particle) sit abwab (Masculine Possessed)* (A wardrobe with six doors)

According to Guella (2012, p. 3), it is a linguistic fact that ‘abu’ enjoys wider currency than the situationally restricted ‘um’. While ‘abu’ can be used with both feminine and masculine possessed, ‘um’ seems to be used in restricted instances, and with feminine possessed in most cases.

However, the researcher believes that a simpler rule underlies the use of these two possession markers; the choice of ‘abu’ or ‘um’ follows the gender of the possessor, the former is used with a masculine possessor and the latter with a feminine one, as in:

(18) *um alqura* (The mother of all villages, i.e. Mecca)

(19) *abu albashar* (The father of mankind, i.e. Adam)

Again, all the sentences in this subsection exemplify non-possession being conceptualised in terms of possession, e.g. qualification and characterisation.

2.2.3 Possessor + **thu** or **that** + Possessed

Masculine ‘**thu**’ and feminine ‘**that**’, which are the classical analytic markers denoting the possession of a quality, attribute, or characteristic, appear in the constructions ‘Possessor (feminine) + **that** + Possessed’ and ‘Possessor (masculine) + **thu** + Possessed’, as in the following (cf. Guella, 1983):

(20) *albintu thatu alsha’ri aljameeli* (The girl with the beautiful hair)

(21) *alrajulu thu alsawti alhasani* (The man with the nice voice)

2.3 ‘**hag**’ and ‘**taba**’

‘**hag**’ is frequently used in the Saudi dialect, especially in the Hijazi sub-dialect, as a possessive marker. It denotes the existence of a quality or characteristic pertaining to a person or thing. It can be found in the structure ‘Possessed + **hag** + Possessor’ to mean ‘belonging to’, ‘pertaining to’, or ‘characteristic of a person’, e.g.

(22) *kitab hag hurma* (a book of a woman)

(23) *alkitab hag alhurma* (The book of the woman)

The same structural patterns apply to ‘**taba**’, which is frequent in the Syrian and Lebanese dialects, e.g.

(24) *haida alsa’iq taba’na* (This driver is ours)

(25) *ilsayyara taba’ ilwazeer* (The ministry’s car)

Example (24) should by no means be understood as expressing possession. Rather, it is used to conceptualise someone’s working for someone else or for an organization.

It is perhaps in place to state that both ‘**hag**’ and ‘**taba**’ match ‘of-construction’ and ‘-’s’ in English.

2.4 Possessed + mal + Possessor

In Bahrain, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait, the particle ‘mal’ is frequently used. This possessive marker enters in the same structural patterns and meanings as the Egyptian ‘bita’, the Saudi ‘hag’, and the Syrian and Lebanese ‘taba’ (cf. Holes, 1984, pp. 127, 128, 186), e.g.

(26) *iltabkhat thi killaha mal ilkhaleej* (All these dishes are from the Gulf, i.e. the Arab Gulf)

(27) *hal'akil moo malkum* (This food order is not yours)

(28) *iljaw mal ilkhaleej* (The climate of the Gulf, i.e. the Arab Gulf)

Apart from its unmarked use as a possessive marker, ‘mal’ often appears in non-possessive context, usually description, as in the three examples above.

2.5 Possessor-Possessed Relationship Expressed via Adjective and Preposition

This construction is represented by the prepositional genitive of the possessed noun. It is reminiscent of the French constructions ‘Sylvie a de jolis yeux’ (Sylvie has pretty eyes) and ‘Les yeux de Sylvie sont jolis’ (The eyes of Sylvie are pretty) (see Frei, 1939). A similar type of construction is present in almost all Arabic dialects, including classical Arabic. In the examples below, if we take the direct constructions in (29 a) and (30 a) to be the underlying forms, the converse type constructions in (29 b, c) and (30 b, c) will be obtained by transformation. It is worth mentioning that in English the same concept can be expressed via ‘of-construction’ and/or ‘-’s’:

(29)

- a. *ilwald rasu majrooh* (The boy’s head is wounded)
- b. *ilwald majrooh min rasu* (The boy is wounded in the head)
- c. *ras ilwald majrooh* (The head of the boy is wounded)

(30)

- a. *ilhurma eynha amya* (Lit. The woman’s eye is blind)
- b. *ilhurma amya min eynha* (Lit. The woman is blind from the eye)
- c. *eyn ilhurma amya* (Lit. The eye of the woman is blind)

A tentative formulation of the transformations involved in (29) and (30) above will yield the following rules for a, b, and c, respectively:

I. Possessor + Possessed + Adjective

II. Possessor + Adjective + Preposition + Possessed

III. Possessed + Possessor + Adjective

In all the Arab Gulf dialects, the preposition in (II) is usually ‘min’ or ‘ib’. The converse type is obtained only if the possessor and the possessed are of one and the same substance, or enter in a possessive relationship of part/whole. What can be further noticed here is that the possessed noun obligatorily carries a possessive pronoun referring to the possessor.

Finally, it is worth noting that there is a less frequent strategy involving double marking of possession in different manifestations, which matches double genitive in English. This strategy is gaining ground nowadays, and constructions that attest such a strategy are found in Lebanese Arabic. Examples of this strategy are regularly heard on radio and TV programmes, e.g.

(31) tahayyatu la fadi la kull ilmustam'een (Lit. The greetings / his / of / Fadi / to / all / the listeners, meaning ‘Fadi’s greetings to all listeners’)

This technique is gaining wider and wider currency among other speakers of Arabic, especially among the younger generations. These media occurrences, being used on a regular basis and supported by various other phenomena like globalisation and linguistic prestige and fashion, will certainly imprint new linguistic patterns, and will shape a new linguistic behaviour.

3. Summary and Conclusions

The foregoing structures reflect a first survey of what is believed to be the entire dimension of possessive constructions in a large Arabic language area. Their analysis and distribution yield the following classification:

1. The construct state, i.e. the juxtaposition of the possessed and the possessor in both determinate and indeterminate occurrences, e.g.

(32) kitab walad (A book of a boy)

(33) kitab ilwalad (The book of the boy)

2. A separate element intervenes between the possessed and the possessor. This element can be a possessive marker or classifier. Representative examples of such elements include: ‘bita’ in the Egyptian dialect, ‘diyal’ in the Moroccan dialect, ‘hag’ in the Kuwaiti and Saudi dialects, ‘mal’ in the Iraqi dialect, ‘taba’ in the Lebanese and Syrian dialects, etc.
3. On a formal level, the nature of the possessive relationships in Arabic ranges from the least explicit to the most explicit. The ‘nominal + nominal’ structure is represented by a lexical class, whereas the expression of possession via a syntactic predication is also possible. Although beyond the realm of this study, as noted at the beginning of this study, paraphrases by verbs of possession are provided here for illustrative purposes to show the whole array of possible realisations.
4. Each structure shows more ‘syntacticisation’ than the preceding one. In the construct state, no special syntactic means indicate the nature of the possessive relationship. By contrast, constructions involving an intervening element show a number of syntactic means to exhibit the mode of construction of a possessive relationship. On a functional level, this entails an increase in the amount of information conveyed by the constructions, from one pole to the other.
5. Most importantly, possessive constructions can so often be used to conceptualise non-possession concepts, so to speak. This holds true for both the Arabic dialects in scrutiny and the English language.

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الخلاصة

"تراكيب التملك في بعض اللهجات العربية بالإشارة إلى اللغة الإنكليزية"

هذه الدراسة تحليل لتراكيب التملك في عدد من اللهجات، تحديدا اللهجة العربية العراقية وبعض اللهجات العربية في منطقة الخليج العربي واللهجة العربية الفصحى. إلا أن الدراسة لا تخلو من بعض الإشارات إلى لهجات عربية أخرى كلما استدعت الضرورة ذلك. تتناول الدراسة الجوانب الشكلية في التعبير عن فكرة التملك في لهجات منفردة، ومن ثم بيان نظيراتها في اللهجة العربية الفصحى. تستكشف الدراسة الاستراتيجيات المتبعة في صياغة تراكيب التملك في اللهجات التي تتناولها بغية تقديم خلاصة شكلية عنها من منظور مقارنة.

المنهج المتبنى في هذه الدراسة لتحليل ظاهرة التملك لغوي أكثر منه إدراكي. وهو قائم على الافتراض بأن التملك اللغوي يستلزم مسبقا التملك الإدراكي. إثر وصف و تحليل مقارنة لتراكيب التملك في اللهجة العربية الفصحى و اللهجات العربية موضع الدراسة، يتبين أنه ثمة تغير جلي حصل و مازال يحصل في صياغة تراكيب التملك. وإن هذا التغير يمكن عزوه إلى أسباب عديدة، فعلى سبيل المثال، في لهجات المغرب العربي التوجه نحو الانتقال من تراكيب تملك ناتجة عن تغير الحالة الإعرابية (أي البنية الصرفية) إلى تراكيب تملك قائمة على كلمات مركبة (أي وحدات نحوية)، ما هو إلا تأثر واضح باللغة البربرية. ومن جهة أخرى، اللهجة العربية الفصحى واللهجات العربية الخليجية، تبدو عليها أوجه تشابه مع اللغات الأوروبية، سيما الإنكليزية والفرنسية، في التعبير عن التملك بأساليب أكثر ديناميكية.

التواصل المتزايد بين اللغات في عالم اليوم يلعب دورا بارزا في جرف اللهجات العربية المختلفة بعيدا عن اللهجة العربية الفصحى التي تتصف بالتعويل كثيرا في التعبير عن التملك على الحالة الإعرابية، لا التركيبية النحوية المفردة.