

Possessive Constructions in Arabic: A Cross-dialectal Study

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Abstract. This contribution is a cross-dialectal analysis of possessive constructions. The dialects under study include the Maghribin dialects and some of the dialects in the Arabian Gulf. The paper analyzes the formal aspects involved in the construction of the notion of possession in individual dialects and its relation to Standard Arabic. The resulting strategies of possessive formation and structure will be exhibited and formalized in a vast array of Arabic dialects from a comparative perspective. It will be found that an important linguistic shift has been and still is operating in the construction of possessive structure. This shift is due to many reasons. One of the most important reasons is the contact with other languages or linguistic structures. In the case of Maghribin dialects, the paper finds that the shift from ‘synthetic’ construction to a more ‘analytic’ construction is due to a recognized Berber substratum. On the other hand, and in the case of the Arabian Gulf regional dialects and Classical Arabic, several linguistic forces are in play in the formation of a more dynamic type of possessive structure.

Introduction

This study analyzes several elements related to the notion of possession and the various strategies of its formation in play in a number of Arabic dialects. It proposes the beginning of a linguistic formalization of possessive structures from a comparative perspective, taking as database linguistic structures belonging to Maghribin dialects, dialects of the Arabian Gulf, and classical Arabic. It should be noted that the study does not in any case completely bring out all the diverse aspects of possession, whether they be conceptual or linguistic in nature.

In linguistics, the notion of possession is far from clear. This is not the place to propose a whole “grammaire de la possession” (Gueron and Zribi-Hertz, 1998), 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 is more linguistic than formal or conceptual, although it attempts to integrate lexical and functional semantics in a loose way (Partee and Borchev, 1998). It incorporates the idea that linguistic possession presupposes notional or conceptual possession. This is the reason why only a few linguistic structures of

‘possessiveness’ are treated in this study. However, the formalization scheme proposed at the end of the paper will be typically structural in nature.

Linguistic possession represents a relationship between a POSSESSOR and a POSSESSED. Syntactically speaking, POSSESSION is a relation between nominal and nominal, 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 realization will be exhibited in the scale of strategies (NVN), and this to show its place in the classification covering the domain of possessive constructions in Arabic dialects (cf. p. 8). The structures serving the expression of POSSESSION in this cross-linguistic study will be termed STRATEGIES. What follows, then, exhibits the different STRATEGIES contributing to the expression of POSSESSION in the Arabic dialects concerned. These strategies have been isolated from fieldwork, or drawn or borrowed from the vast amount of classical and modern literature in the Arabic language area (cf. Cantineau, 1934, 1936, 1946; Cantarino, 1974-75; Cohen, 1968, 1973; Corriente, 1977; Ferguson *et al.*, 1961; Grand’Henry, 1972, 1979; Harrell, 1962; Johnstone, 1967; Mitchell,

1962; Monteil, 1960; Panetta, 1943; Piamenta, 1966; and a host of others not referenced here).

Strategies of Possessive Structures in the Arabic Dialects

Strategy one: POSSESSED + POSSESSOR

The first strategy presented here is that referred to in the literature as the “construct state” (cf. Wright, 1967; Gaudefroy-Demombynes and Blachère, 1952; Beeston, 1970, for example). In this strategy, illustrated below by Maghribin dialectal examples, two nouns follow each other in a relation expressing possession or association.

Example:

bint qa:yed

(a daughter of a Caid) / indeterminate
(girl/daughter – Caid)

bint el-qayed

(the daughter of the Caid) / determinate
(girl/daughter – the Caid)

This construction cannot be mediated by any word. In the presence of an adjective qualifying the POSSESSED, it must be placed after the POSSESSOR.

Example:

ba:b ed-da:r el- mherres

(the broken door of the house)
(door – the house – the/which broken)

When two or more nouns follow the first noun, only the last substantive, the POSSESSOR, is marked by determinacy or definiteness. The examples below are based on the dialect of Nédroma (Guella, 1983).

Example:

ba:b ed-da:r

(the door of the house)
(door – the house)

ba:b da:r el-qa:yed

(the door of the Caid's house)
(door – house – the Caid)

bint weld es-solta:n

(the king's grand-daughter)
(girl/daughter – boy/son – the king)

lu:h ba:b da:r es-soltan

(the door's wood of the king's house)
(wood – house – house – the king)

lu:n lu:h ba:b da:r es-soltan

(color – wood – door – house – the king)
(the color of the door's wood of the king's house)

It must be noted that when the POSSESSOR is indeterminate, or is suffixed pronominally, the definite article marking possessivity disappears.

Example:

ba:b da:r

(a door of a house)
(door – house)

'i:d mila:d bint solta:n

(a birthday of a king's daughter)
(festival – birth – girl/daughter – king)

Strategy two: POSSESSOR + POSSESSED

In classical Arabic and various other dialects in the Gulf, many nouns or particles are used in combination with substantives to denote the idea of possession, geographic or ethnic origin, companionship, etc. Among the nouns, we may quote the following: *abu* ('father of', 'owner of'), *umm* ('mother of', 'owner of'), *dhu* ('of'), *ahl* ('people'), *sa:heb* ('people of', 'owners of'), etc. This strategy is ancient and is found in practically all the Gulf dialects. In this strategy, we can distinguish two cases.

Case 1: *ABU*, *UMM*, etc. + POSSESSED

Example:

abu sha:m

(of Syrian origin)

ahl es-sunna

(Sunna followers/conformers)

It must be noted that the constructions *abu* + POSSESSED or *umm* + POSSESSED are also largely used as forms of address instead of the real POSSESSOR.

Example:

abu hamza, *umm hamza* are frequently used as forms of replacement.

This construction is also used, in reduced forms, in Maghribin dialects to convey a meaning of possession of a feature or characteristic, and frequently in patronymic and ancestral names.

Example:

bu sh'o:r or *bu saalef*

(the one with long hair)
(owner of – hair (pl.)) (owner of – hair)

bu ferra

(the one with a missing tooth)
(owner of – hole/break (in the mouth))

bugettaya, buxerruuba, bu'naani, etc.
(as patronymic names)

Case 2: POSSESSOR + *ABU*, *UMM*, etc. + POSSESSED

This case is an extension of Case 1 and is largely applied in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Gulf Region to convey a notion of specific possession, or the possession of a special feature or quality. Thus, the following examples are much more examples of a demonstrative possession than anything else.

Example:

es-sayyara abu arba' 'ajalaat
(the car (having) four wheels)
(the car – of – four – wheels)

er-rajel abu 'gaal
(the man (having) a 'gaal)
(the man – of – 'gaal)

er-rajel abu ghotra
(the man wearing a ghotra)
(the man – of – ghotra)

In his *Colloquial Arabic of the Gulf and Saudi Arabia* (1984), Clive Holes indicates that *abu* and *umm* are normally used, respectively, with a feminine POSSESSED and a masculine POSSESSED. Holes himself acknowledges this situation to be “a strange fact of grammar” (1984: p. 240). To substantiate his claim, he provides the examples.

musajjila umm mikrufuun thaabit
(recorder – POSS. – microphone – fixed)
(where *umm* is used with a masculine *mikrufuun*)

and

abu 'uyuun fattaana
(owner of – eyes – captivating)
(where *abu* is used with a feminine *'uyuun*)

In other words, Holes suggests that the strategy used in these constructions is as follows:

POSSESSOR + *abu* + feminine POSSESSED
POSSESSOR + *umm* + masculine POSSESSED

The suggestion of this ‘obligatory’ possessive structure by Holes calls for three remarks:

1) HOLES himself provides only one more example [*sayyaara abu daxlatayn* (1984:239)] to support the “normalcy” and the generalization of his suggestion. Numerous other examples can easily be given in the Gulf dialects to show that HOLES's suggestion does not obtain in an obligatory rule.

Example:

dulaab abu sett abwaab
(lit. wardrobe – POSS. – six – doors)

2) It is a linguistic fact that, rather, *abu* enjoys wider currency than the situationally restricted *umm*. While *abu* can be used with both feminine and masculine POSSESSED, *umm* seems to be used in restricted instances, and with feminine POSSESSED in most cases, like in *umm al qoraa*, *umm al-dunia*, etc.

3) Masculine *dhu* and feminine *dhaat*, the classical analytic markers denoting a possession of a quality, attribute or characteristic, demonstrate once again that it is the following constructions which are the norm,
Feminine POSSESSOR + *dhaat* + POSSESSED
and
Masculine POSSESSOR + *dhu* + POSSESSED
as in

al-bint-u dhaat-u al-sha'ri al-jamiili
(the girl – of – the hair - det. – beautiful)
and in

al-rajul-u dhu al-wazni al-thaqiili
(the man – of – the weight – det. – heavy)

4) Similarly, the other Magribin and Gulf dialects offer ample illustration in favor of the classical patterns. Parallel constructions, based on Guella (1983), include examples such as:

el-weld muul le-ктааб vs. **el-bint moola le-ктааб**

el-weld Saaheb le-ктааб vs. **el-bint Saahbet le-ктааб**

Strategy three: hagg, tab'

hagg as a possessive marker is frequently used in Saudi Arabia, especially the Hijaz. It denotes the existence of a quality or characteristic pertaining to a person or thing. It can be found in the structures *hagg* + indefinite POSSESSOR (like in *hagg horma*) to mean belonging to, pertaining to, characteristic of a woman. It is also used as an answer and affirmation of a question. In this latter case, the usual pattern is *hagg* + definite POSSESSOR.

Example:

al-kitab hagg al-horma

(the book belongs to the woman)

(the book – of – the woman)

The same structural patterns apply to *tab'*, which is frequent in Syria and Lebanon.

Example:

haad al-sajjiq taba'na

(this driver is ours)

(this – the driver – belong – us)

As-sajjara tab' al-wizara

(this is the ministry's car)

(the car – belong – the ministry)

Shtriit dawaliib tab' as-sajjara

(I bought wheels for the car)

(bought – I – wheels – belong – the car)

Strategy four: POSSESSED + maal + POSSESSOR

In Bahrain, in the United Arab Emirates and in Kuwait, the particle *maal* is frequently used. This possessive marker is almost completely unknown in Maghribin dialects (except in the formulae *maal-ek*, *maal-hum* meaning 'what's wrong with you, them' and as a substantive meaning 'money', 'wealth'). The possessive marker *maal* enters in the same structural patterns and meanings as the Maghribin *ntaa'* and *djaal*, the Egyptian *bitaa'*, Saudi *hagg* and Syrian *tab'*. The examples illustrating the use of *maal* are borrowed from Clive Holes (1984).

iT-Tabxaat dhi killaha maal il xaliij (p. 127)

(All these dishes are from the Gulf)

hal-akil muu maalkum (p. 128)

(This food order is not yours)

iTTawla haadhi shu r-raqam maalah? (p. 128)

(What's the number of this table)

il-jaw maal il-xaliij (p. 186)

(the Gulf climate)

Strategy five: POSSESSED + {-en} + Det. + POSSESSOR

While Strategy one (POSSESSED + POSSESSOR) in both its determinate and indeterminate nature constitutes the normal dialectal occurrence in Maghribin Arabic dialects, we notice another strategy embodied in the existence of a

Berber genitive suffix marker {-en} attached to the POSSESSED. This strategy, where the marker of possession is expressed in an analytic way, is especially present in some Algerian urban dialects like those of Nédroma and Tlemcen (cf. Guella, 1983), and a large portion of Moroccan dialects. However, the occurrence of {-en} is limited to a few kinship terms.

Example:

xaay-en er-raajel

(the man's brother)

(brother – POSS – the man)

yemmaay -en el-bent

(the girl's mother)

(mother – POSS. – the girl)

uxt -en el-weld

(the boy's sister)

(sister- POSS. – the boy)

bwaay -en Saahbi

(my friend's father)

(father – POSS.- friend – my)

xaalt -en eT-Tbiib

(the doctor's maternal aunt)

(maternal aunt – POSS. – the doctor)

Strategy six: POSSESSED + POSSESSOR Pronoun + ntaa' + POSSESSOR

From a comparative cross-dialectal perspective, it appears that the Berber genitive suffix {-en} is replaced in its manifestation by the Arabic possessive pronoun *ntaa'*, as expounded in strategy six presently reviewed. One substantiating factor of this comes from the Arabic dialect of Tlemcen (Algeria), where the same strategy obtains, but where the marker changes. This situation gives rise to a peculiar strategy of double possession marking, where the cataphoric POSSESSOR pronoun makes a progressive reference to the POSSESSOR proper. This construction is not familiar to Eastern Arabian dialect speakers.

Example:

xaa-h ntaa' raajel – ha

(his brother of her husband')

(brother – his – POSS. – husband-her) (= her husband's brother)

Uxt -ha ntaa' hliima

(her sister of Halima' = Halima's sister)

(sister – her – POSS. – Halima)

Ktaab-ha ntaa' uxt-ha
(‘her book of her sister’ = her sister’s book)
(book – her – POSS. – sister-her)

Clearly, these constructions are shaped on the same mould as Berber double possessive constructions of the type

yell- iis en mohand
(= Mohand’s daughter)
or
(daughter – his – POSS. – Mohand)

mm- iis en ‘amm- i
(= my cousin)
(son – his – POSS. – uncle – my)

This strategy has already been reported by Philippe Marçais (1956), but his observations concern the dialect of Djidjelli, in eastern Algeria. The examples that he provides (on page 421) show the possessive marker *eddi*. The structures exhibited, however, are similar to the structures recorded in Tlemcen, western Algeria, except that the marker is *ntaa’*. The origin of these structures, together with the formation of the possessive ligature {-en} is attributed to a Berber influence, if not to a conservation of a Berber substratum. It should be noted that this strategy of double marking of possession, in its different manifestations, is gaining ground. In a recent Algerian serial film called “Shahra”, popular with young audiences, very numerous occurrences of this strategy are heard, one of them referring to the heroin of the film as

bent ‘amm-u ntaa’ haada
(girl/daughter – uncle – his – POSS. – this one)
(= it’s his cousin (fem) [of this one (masc)])

Other similar cases of ‘double possessive’ constructions are also found in other dialects in the Near East. One of these attested techniques is found in Lebanese Arabic constructions. Examples of this strategy are regularly heard on radio and TV programs. The Lebanese Arabic possessive technique exhibited in the example

tahayyat-u la- fahd la-kulli el-mustami’iin
(greetings – his – of – Fahd – to – all the – listeners)
(= Fahd’s greetings to all listeners)

is certainly gaining wider and wider currency among other speakers of Arabic, especially among the younger generations. These media occurrences,

repeated on a regular basis to large audiences, and helped by various other phenomena like globalization and linguistic prestige and fashion, will certainly imprint new linguistic patterns and shape a new linguistic behavior. In the case of possessive constructions, new strategies are certainly in the making in the Arabic dialect area.

Strategy seven: POSSESSOR + Adjectival + Preposition + POSSESSED

This construction is represented by the (prepositional) genitive of the POSSESSED noun. It is reminiscent of the French construction “Sylvie est jolie des yeux”, made famous by Henri Frei in an article bearing the same title. Frei calls *Sylvie est jolie des yeux* ‘le type converse’. He contrasts it with ‘le tour direct’, exemplified in

- (i) *Sylvie a de jolis yeux*
(Sylvie – has – (some) – pretty – eyes)
and
- (ii) *Les yeux de Sylvie sont jolis*
(the – eyes – of – Sylvie – are – pretty)

A similar type of construction is present in practically all Arabic dialects, including Classical Arabic. If we take the following groups of ‘direct’ constructions (on the left) to be the underlying forms, the ‘converse type’ constructions (on the right) will obtain by transformation.

- a. (i) *el mughenni halg-u xshiin*
(the – singer – voice-his coarse)] → *el mughenni xshiin min halg-u*
(ii) *halg el mughenni xshiin*
(the – singer – coarse – from – voice – his)
(voice – the singer – coarse)
- b. (i) *el-weld Raas-u majruuh*
(the – boy – head – his – hurt)] → *el-weld majruuh min Raas-u*
(ii) *Raas el-weld majruuh*
(the – boy – hurt – from – head – his)
(head – the-boy - hurt)
- c. (i) *el-horma ‘ayn-ha ‘amya*
(the – woman – eye – her – blind)] → *el-horma ‘amya min ‘ayn-ha*
(ii) *‘ayn el-horma ‘amya*
(the – woman – blind – from – eye – her)
(eye – the – woman – blind)

A tentative formulation of the transformations involved in the examples a, b and c above will yield the following rule:

- d. (i) *Det. + Possessor + Possessed-Poss. Pro. + Adjective*] → *Det. + Possessor + Adj. + Prep. 'min' + Possessed*
 (ii) *Possessed + Det. + Possessor + Adjective*

The 'converse type' obtains only if the POSSESSOR and the POSSESSED, which for the French examples FREI calls 'the two logical subjects', 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.

Concluding Remarks: Scaling the Strategies

The foregoing strategies 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 its determinate and indeterminate occurrences. (*ktaab weld / ktaab el-weld*)
2. A separate element intervenes between the POSSESSED and the POSSESSOR. This element can be a possessive marker or classifier. The POSSESSOR and POSSESSED may be determinate or indeterminate. *ntaa' hagg ktaab [taab'] el-weld dyaal* (book – POSS. – the boy).
3. A marker is attached ONLY to the POSSESSED. This marker is the bound morpheme {-en} in some Maghribin dialects. This construction is of Berber origin, and is mostly used in some kinship terms and relations. (*xaalt-en Saahb-i / uxt-en samiir*).
4. A marker is attached to BOTH the POSSESSED and the POSSESSOR, with an intervening element between the nominals. This construction is also of Berber origin. (*ktaab-ha ntaa' uxt-ha / weld 'ammu ntaa' samiir*).

What can be noticed in this classification is the presence of two constructions attributed to a Berber influence, if not to a conservation of a Berber substratum. The following scale is set up to cover the domain of possession in Arabic dialects.

<i>ntaa'</i>			
NN	NNposs.	N marker N	Nposs.
[hagg]	Nposs.	(NVN)	
<i>dyaal</i>			
<i>taab</i>			
1	2	3	4
(5)			

From this scale, we may conclude by recording four remarks:

1. On a formal level, the scale shows that the nature of the possessive relationships in Arabic ranges from the least explicit to the most explicit.
2. The NN pole is represented by a lexical class, whereas the (NVN) pole is represented by a syntactic predication (illustrated by verbs of possession, and not studied here as specified at the beginning of this presentation, but they are represented for illustrative purposes to show the whole array of possible realizations).
3. Each strategy on the continuum shows more 'syntacticization' than the preceding one. In the construct state, no special syntactic means indicate the nature of the possessive relationship. By contrast, constructions 4 and (5) 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.
4. On a more general linguistic level, it may be observed that historical language contact and Berber influence have contributed in making the spectrum of Arabic possessive constructions a complex and varied one, covering types ranging from simple juxtaposition of nouns to constructions of greater analyticity and syntacticization.

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بنى الملكية في العربية: دراسة عبر اللهجات

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ملخص البحث. هذه الدراسة تعنى بتحليل مقارن عبر اللهجات لبنى الملكية في اللغة العربية. تناول البحث بالدراسة اللهجات المغاربية وبعض لهجات الخليج العربي. يحلل البحث الجوانب الرسمية التي ينطوي عليها مفهوم التملك في كل لهجة بعينها وعلاقتها باللغة العربية القياسية. وستعرض الإستراتيجيات الحاصلة لتشكيل بنى التملك وتصاغ في بنى رسمية في كم كبير من اللهجات العربية من زاوية مقارنة. إن المقاربة المعتمدة في تحليل هذه الظواهر لغوية أكثر منها فكرية. يدعمها في ذلك التصور الضمني من أن التملك اللغوي يفترض سلفاً تملكاً نفسياً. وهناك بعض الوصف المقارن والتحليل لبنى التملك في اللهجات واللغة العربية القياسية، ويبدو أن هناك نقلة قد حصلت وما زالت مستمرة في تشكيل بنى التملك. ويعود سبب تلك النقلة إلى عدة أسباب أهمها التواصل مع اللغات الأخرى أو بنى أخرى. وفي حالة اللهجات المغاربية، يكتشف البحث أن النقلة من البنى "التركيبية" إلى البنى "التحليلية" سببها طبقة لغوية بربرية تحتية موجودة. وفي الختام، يبدو أن هناك نزعة قوية في بنى التملك في العربية للتحويل من البنى القياسية التركيبية باتجاه بنى تحليلية أكثر دينامية. وإن الواسمات "التحليلية" للبنى الحاصلة سببها الطبقة اللغوية التحتية والتواصل اللغوي المستمر.