

## **Existential predication and transpossessive constructions in typological and diachronic perspective**

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### **1. Introduction**

The predicative constructions commonly designated as ‘existential’ (such as English *There is a book (on the table)*, German *Da ist/liegt ein Buch (auf dem Tisch)*, French *Il y a un livre (sur la table)*, etc.) share with plain locational predication (English *The book is on the table*, German *Das Buch ist/liegt auf dem Tisch*, French *Le livre est sur la table*, etc.) the ability to encode prototypical figure-ground relationships, but with a different perspectivization of figure-ground relationships – Borschev & Partee (2002), Partee & Borschev (2004, 2007).

The notion of possession defined as inclusion in the personal sphere of an individual (Creissels 1979) has an obvious affinity with the notion of location at some place. This explains why possessive predications more or less aligned with locational predication are so common. However, this affinity should not be overestimated.

There is in particular a substantial minority of the world’s languages (represented above by French) showing the following two characteristics:

- the predicator found in existential predication is also found in a transpossessive construction, i.e. a possessive construction in which the possessor and the possessee are coded like the agent and the patient in the basic transitive construction;
- the coding of the figure in existential predication is distinct from that of the figure in plain locational clauses, and aligned with that of the possessee in the transpossessive construction.

Two types of historical explanations can be considered: either the existential construction developed from a pre-existing transpossessive construction, or the possessive construction did not belong initially to the transpossessive type, but has undergone changes making the coding of the possessor similar to that of the agent in the basic transitive construction, or the coding of the possessee similar to that of the patient.

The presentation is organized as follows. After an overview of transpossessive (Section 2) and transpos-existential constructions (Section 3), Section 4 is devoted to the transitivity of locopossessive constructions, and Section 5 deals with the development of transpos-existentials from transpossessive constructions. Section 6 summarizes the conclusions.

## 2. Transpossession constructions

In the transpossession type of predicative possession (‘Have-Possessives’ in Stassen’s (2009) typology), the coding characteristics of the possessor and the possessee are identical to those of the agent and the patient in the basic transitive construction, as in (1).

(1) Mandinka (pers.doc.)<sup>1</sup>

(1a) **Fàatú yè kín-òò tábí kèw-òò-lú yè.**

Fatou CPL.TR meal-D cook man-D-PL for

‘Fatou cooked the meal for the men.’

(1b) **Fàatú yè báadíŋ-òò-lú sòtó ñŋ sàatêe tó.**

Fatou CPL.TR relative-D-PL have DEM village.D LOC

‘Fatou has relatives in this village.’

It is important to observe that the definition of the transpossession type of predicative possession as formulated above refers exclusively to the coding characteristics of the arguments. A more restrictive definition would be hardly applicable, due to the fact that, cross-linguistically, the verbs involved in this type of construction are rarely (if ever) perfectly canonical transitive verbs. For example, in Spanish, the behavior of **tener** ‘have’ in differential object marking is not identical to that of more typical transitive verbs.

(2) Spanish (pers.doc.)

(2a) **Conozco a una persona que te puede ayudar.**

know.PRS.1SG ACC INDEF.F.SG person.SG that 2SG.DAT be\_able.PRS.3SG help.INF

‘I know a person who can help you.’

(2b) **Tengo un amigo que te puede ayudar.**

have.PRS.1SG INDEF.M.SG friend.SG that 2SG.DAT be\_able.PRS.3SG help.INF

‘I have a friend who can help you.’

Historically, transpossession constructions may result either from a semantic change affecting transitive verbs expressing meanings such as ‘take’, ‘grasp’ ‘hold’, ‘get’, ‘bear’, or from the transitivization of possessive constructions of other types – see Section 4.

Transpossession constructions are very common cross-linguistically, much more common than was thought some decades ago. The widespread view that transpossession constructions are rare outside Europe does not stand to scrutiny.<sup>2</sup> To take just one example, among the Atlantic languages of West Africa, I am aware of only one case of a language (Balant Kentohe) in which the usual expression of possessive predication does not belong to the transpossession type.

<sup>1</sup> The abbreviation ‘pers.doc.’ (personal documentation) refers to data I collected myself on poorly documented or undocumented languages on which I carried out fieldwork, or to data taken from pedagogical grammars or constructed according to the indications given by descriptive grammars, which in both cases have been checked with the help of native speakers.

<sup>2</sup> The origin of this opinion can be traced back to the theory of language change elaborated in the first half of the 20th century by Indo-Europeanists such as Meillet.

### 3. Transpossession-existentials

Transpossession-existentials are defined as existential constructions involving a predicator also used in a transpossession construction, and in which the coding of the figure NP is identical to the coding of the possessee NP in the possessive construction. In its existential use, this predicator may occur either alone or combined with an expletive pronoun.

For example, in its transitive construction, the Greek verb **écho** ‘have’ has a zero-marked (‘nominative’) subject with which it agrees, and an accusative object, as in (3a). But this verb also has an existential use in an impersonal construction with an accusative object representing the figure but no zero-marked NP, in which the verb invariably includes a non-referential 3rd person singular index – Ex. (3b). Ex. (4) illustrates a transpossession-existential construction in a language that does not have subject-verb agreement, and in which the absence of a noun phrase preceding a verb also used as a transitive verb of possession is the only thing that differentiates existential clauses from possessive clauses.

(3) Greek (pers.doc.)

(3a) **Ta chōriá den échoun neró.**  
 the villages NEG have.PRS.3PL water.ACC  
 ‘The villages don’t have water.’

(3b) **Den eíche Germanóus sto chōrió.**  
 NEG have.PST.3SG Germans.ACC in.the village  
 ‘There were no Germans in the village.’<sup>3</sup>

(4) Palikur (Launey 2003: 80)

(4a) **Nah kadahan aynesa karukri.**  
 I have some money  
 ‘I have some money.’

(4b) **Kadahan im ahakwa un.**  
 have fish in water  
 ‘There are fish in the water.’

As already mentioned, transpossession constructions are quite frequent in the languages of the world. Transpossession-existential constructions are not found in all languages that have transpossession, but they are not rare either. Transpossession-existentials are common, not only in Central and South Europe, but also in the Northern part of Sub-Saharan Africa (where they are particularly common among Atlantic languages), in South-East Asia,<sup>4</sup> and among Pidgin and Creole languages.

The predominance of transpossession-existentials among Pidgins and Creoles is particularly striking: out of the 75 Pidgin and Creole varieties dealt with in the Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Language Structures (Michaelis et al. 2013), 41 have an existential predicative construction of this type. Interestingly, in this sample, transpossession-existentials are found in 19 out of the 26

<sup>3</sup> In an appropriate context, this sentence could also be interpreted as ‘He/she did not have Germans in the village.’

<sup>4</sup> On the analysis of the possessive and existential constructions of Southeast Asian languages, cf. Chappell & Creissels 2016.

Pidgin and Creole varieties whose lexifier language is English, i.e. a language which does not have this type of existential predication.

#### 4. Transitivity of locopossessive constructions

##### 4.1. Introductory remarks

Locopossessive constructions can be defined as constructions involving the same predicator (or lack thereof) as locational or existential predication, and in which the possessee is coded like the figure in locational predication, whereas the possessor shows some kind of oblique marking, as in (5).

(5) Belarusian (Mazzitelli 2015)

(5a) **Mašyna byla kalja jaho.**  
 car be.PST.SG.F near 3SG.M.GEN  
 ‘The car was near to him.’

(5b) **U jaho byla mašyna.**  
 at 3SG.M.GEN be.PST.SG.F car  
 ‘He had a car.’ lit. ‘At him was a car.’

As rightly observed by Stassen (2009: 209), in a diachronic perspective, there is a clear dissymmetry between transpossessives and the other types of predicative possession. A construction that initially belongs to any of the other types may acquire features that make it more similar to the transpossession type, and may eventually be converted into a construction that, synchronically, can only be analyzed as a transpossession construction. By contrast, in the history of a language, a transpossession construction may be replaced by a construction belonging to another type, but there is no example of a transpossession construction affected by changes analyzable in terms of drift toward another type of predicative possession.

##### 4.2. Development of a P-like coding of the possessee in locopossessive constructions

Evolutions by virtue of which the possessee in a locopossessive construction acquires coding properties typical of P in transitive predication have been described among others for Finnish (Creissels 2013), Israeli Hebrew (Ziv 1982, Zuckermann 2009), and Amharic (Ahland 2009).

For example, sentences such as those in (6) may suggest that, in Finnish, predicative possession is a typical instantiation of the locopossessive type, and that, syntactically, both the figure NP in the existential construction and the possessee NP in the possessive construction are inverted subjects.

(6) Finnish (Seppo Kittilä, pers.com.)

(6a) **Kadulla on auto.**  
 street.ADESS be.PRS.3SG car  
 ‘There is a car in the street.’

(6b) **Pekalla on auto.**  
 Pekka.ADESS be.PRS.3SG car  
 ‘Pekka has a car.’

However, in the possessive construction, the case marking of the possessee NP departs from that of subjects and is more similar to that of objects. In Finnish, the case marking of subjects and objects is complex, and largely ambiguous. Zero (or ‘nominative’) marking is not decisive, since in constructions that do not include a zero-marked subject (for example, in the imperative), object NPs may be in the zero case, and personal pronouns are the only nominals having an accusative form that unambiguously marks their use in object function.

In the construction illustrated in (6a), the status of the figure NP as an inverted subject is corroborated by the impossibility to have an accusative-marked personal pronoun in the same position. By contrast, as illustrated in (7), in the possessive construction, personal pronouns in possessee role are usually in the accusative case, which excludes analyzing them as inverted subjects.

(7) Finnish (Seppo Kittilä, pers.com.)

(7a) **Pekalla on hänet.**  
 Pekka.ADESS be.PRS.3SG 3SG.ACC  
 ‘Pekka has her.’

(7b) **?Pekalla on hän.**  
 Pekka.ADESS be.PRS.3SG 3SG

A plausible explanation is that the possessee, contrary to the figure in a spatial relationship, has at least some affinities with the patient of prototypical transitive predication in terms of lack of control or affectedness. Consequently, in a locational/existential construction whose use had been extended to the expression of possession, the syntactically ambiguous zero marking of the NP representing the possessee has been reanalyzed as encoding object rather than subject function, and this reanalysis subsequently concretized with the possible use of unambiguous accusative forms in the same syntactic slot. The result is a non-canonical (or hybrid) coding frame partially aligned with transitive coding, in which however the possessor NP maintains an oblique coding aligned with that of the ground NP in locational and existential predication.

#### 4.3. Topicalization of the possessee and reanalysis of locopossessive constructions

Prototypical possessors have a high degree of inherent topicality, which may explain a tendency to topicalize them in possessive clauses of the locopossessive type, since in this particular type of predicative possession, the syntactic treatment of the possessor does not imply the status of default topic.

Let’s take for example the case of a language in which existential predication and predicative possession can be schematized as follows:

**There.is figure (at ground)**

**There.is possessee at possessor**

NPs moved to a topic position at the left periphery of the clause are commonly involved in two phenomena variously regulated by the individual languages: they may lose the adpositions or case marks they would take in the argumental position corresponding to their

semantic role, and they may be resumed by a pronoun. Consequently, depending on the topicalization strategies of the individual languages, the following types of construction may develop as the topicalized variant of **There.is possessee at possessor**:

**Possessor, there.is possessee**

**Possessor, at him/her there.is possessee**

A construction which is initially the topicalized variant of a locopossessive construction may generalize as the unmarked way of formulating predicative possession, making obsolete the original locopossessive construction. The absence of flagging of the possessor in the resulting possessive construction implies reanalyzing the existential predicator as a polysemous predicator occurring in two distinct constructions:

- an existential construction in which it assigns the role of ground to an oblique-marked NP,
- a possessive construction in which it assigns the role of possessor to an unflagged NP that precedes it.

In the possessive construction, the originally topicalized possessor is reanalyzed as occupying an argumental position, and this reanalysis manifests itself by the possibility of operations (in particular, questioning), to which topicalized phrases do not have direct access (cf. Chappell & Creissels 2016).

Further evolutions and/or reanalyses of the possessive construction resulting from this change are conditioned by the precise form of the construction and the coding characteristics of the transitive construction in the language in question. The more straightforward case is that of languages in which A and P in the basic transitive construction are neither flagged nor indexed, and are ordered according to the A V P pattern. In such a case, the immediate result of the generalization of the **Possessor, there.is possessee** pattern is a possessive construction in which the coding of the possessor and the possessee is aligned on that of the agent and the patient in basic transitive coding – by definition, a transpossession construction.

Several Arabic varieties, including Maltese, analyzed by Comrie (1989),<sup>5</sup> illustrate a more complex case of have-drift in a locopossessive construction triggered by the generalization of possessor topicalization – cf. Appendix.

## 5. From transpossessives to transpossession-existentials

The historical development of existential constructions from transpossession constructions can be analyzed as starting from the impersonalization of the possessive construction:

- X have Y**
- > **Ø have Y**<sup>6</sup> ‘(at some place) they have Y’ (with non-specific *they*)
  - > **Ø have Y** ‘(at some place) Y is available’

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<sup>5</sup> See also among others Naim (2003) on have-drift in Levantine Arabic.

<sup>6</sup> Ø must not be understood as referring necessarily to the deletion of the possessor NP, but rather to any formal operation (depending on the individual languages: deletion, use of an expletive pronoun, or others) whose initial function is to indicate that the possessor must be interpreted as non-specific.

> **Ø have Y** ‘(at some place) there is Y’

According to this analysis, the crucial move in the evolution from transpossessives to transpossession-existentials is the routinization of the expression of availability at some place by means of an impersonalized variant of the transpossession construction. In this perspective, Krio **dɛn gɛt** ‘there is’, lit. ‘they have’ and Jamaican **yu gat** ‘there is’, lit. ‘you have’ (both from English **get**) are particularly suggestive, since they include a third person plural and second person expletive respectively, and cross-linguistically, third person plural and second person pronouns constitute a particularly common way to express non-specific reference to humans.

Cross-linguistically, constructions expressing possession by a non-specific possessor are commonly used, at least sporadically, in contexts in which the availability of an entity at some place is more prominent than possible possession by virtual possessors located at the place in question, as in (8).

(8) French (pers.knowl.)

**Dans ce quartier vous avez beaucoup de restaurants.**

in this neighborhood you have many of restaurants

‘In this neighborhood there are (lit. you have) many restaurants.’

At some point in the history of a language, such uses of the impersonalized variant of a transpossession construction may become more and more frequent, to the point of constituting the usual expression of availability of an entity at some place, even if the entity in question cannot be viewed as a typically possessed entity. Subsequently, the use of the construction may extend to the expression of episodic presence of an entity at some place, which means that the construction is reanalyzed as a full-fledged existential construction.

## 6. Conclusion

Typology and diachrony do not support the still widespread view that, universally, locative, existential and possessive predications can be analyzed as deriving from a single underlying structure directly reflected in plain locational clauses, as proposed among others by Freeze (1992).

There are several well-attested types of historical change resulting in situations in which predicative possession can hardly be viewed as a possible reading of an existential variant of locational predication, and such situations are not typological oddities that would be limited to a tiny minority of the world’s languages.

In this presentation, I have focused on two types of evolutions involving existential predication that illustrate the complexity of the possible relationships between locative, existential and possessive predications and their status with respect to transitivity (the transitivity of locopossessive constructions, and the development of existential predicative constructions via impersonalization of transpossession constructions), but there are several other well-attested types of change at odds with the conception of possession as a mere excrement of location/existence;

- the conversion of transitive verbs expressing meanings such as ‘take’, ‘grasp’, ‘get’, ‘hold’, ‘bear’ into transitive verbs of possession;
- the development of a possessive reading of comitative predication;
- the development of the use of proprietive verbs or adjectives derived from nouns as the standard way of encoding predicative possession;
- the transitivization of possessive predicative constructions initially belonging to the comitative type.
- the transitivization of possessive predicative constructions initially belonging to the incorporating type.

## Abbreviations

ACC = accusative, ADESS = adessive, CPL = completive, D = definite, DAT = dative, DEM = demonstrative, F = feminine, FUT = future, GEN = genitive, INDEF = indefinite, INF = infinitive, LOC = locative, M = masculine, NEG = negation marker, PL = plural, PRS = present, PST = past, SG = singular, TR = transitive

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## Appendix : the have-drift in Maltese

The predicative construction expressing possession in Arabic is originally a typical locopossessive construction, still considered the norm in Modern Standard Arabic. The possessor is flagged by a preposition, **ʕinda** ‘beside’ or **li** ‘to, for’, and the predicator is **kāna** ‘be’, or its zero variant in the present – Ex. (1a). However, a variant with the possessor NP topicalized and resumed by a pronoun suffixed to the preposition is possible – Ex. (1b). In both cases, ‘be’ agrees with the possessee phrase, in the same way as it agrees with the figure phrase in the existential construction.

(1) Classical Arabic (Comrie 1989: 223-224)

(1a) **Kānat li Zaydin xubzatun.**

was.F to Zayd.GEN loaf.INDEF  
‘Zayd had a loaf.’

(1b) **Zaydun kānat la-hu xubzatun.**

Zayd was.F to-him loaf.INDEF  
‘Zayd had a loaf.’

Ex. (2) illustrates the variant with the preposition **ʕinda** ‘beside’.

(2) Classical Arabic (Ambros 1969: 89)

**ʕinda l-muʕallimi sayyāratun.**

beside D-teacher.GEN car.INDEF  
‘The teacher has a car.’

In Maltese and other varieties such as Tunesian Arabic, the variant of the possessive construction illustrated by Ex. (1a) and (2) has ceased to be possible. In Maltese, **ghand** still exists as a spatial preposition (‘at’) followed by a noun phrase to which the role of ground is assigned, but possessive **ghand** cannot be analyzed as a preposition, since it obligatorily combines with a suffixed possessor index and can only be preceded by a possessor NP co-referent with this index – Ex. (3). Possessive **ghand** can only be analyzed as a possessive predicator (or verboid) whose coding frame is similar to that of a transitive verb: **ghand** ‘have’ is preceded by the unflagged possessor NP in the same way as a transitive verb is preceded by the agent NP, and the obligatory indexation of the possessor on **ghand** is comparable to the obligatory indexation of agents on transitive verbs, although the form of the indexes is different, since the possessor indexes originate from the paradigm of suffixes used to index the complement of a preposition. The reanalysis is confirmed by the fact that the possessive predicator is negated by means of the circumfix **m(a)...x** also used to negate verbs.

(3) Maltese (Comrie 1989: 221-222)

(3a) **Il-ktieb ghand Pawlu.**

D-book at Pawlu  
‘The book is at Pawlu’s.’

- (3b) \***Ghand Pawlu ktieb.**  
at Pawlu book  
intended: ‘Pawlu has a book.’
- (3c) **Pawlu ghand-u ktieb.**  
Pawlu have-3SG.M book  
‘Pawlu has a book.’
- (3d) **Pawlu m’ ghand-u-x ktieb.**  
Pawlu NEG have-3SG.M-NEG book  
‘Pawlu does not have a book.’

Moreover, the possessive construction has undergone other changes that make the difference with the original locopossessive construction even more pronounced. **Ghand** ‘have’ has suppletive past and future forms (**kell** and **sa jkoll** respectively) originating from the combination of the verb ‘be’ with the preposition **li** – Ex. (4). Like the present form **ghand**, these past and future forms are obligatorily suffixed by a possessor index, whereas the agreement with the possessee NP that operated in the original locopossessive construction (as in (1) above) has been lost. This is visible in (4b), since **hobza** is feminine, and \***Pawlu sa tkollu hobza** with feminine agreement is not possible.

(4) Maltese (Comrie 1989: 221-222)

- (4a) **Pawlu kell-u ktieb.**  
Pawlu have.PST-3SG.M book  
‘Pawlu had a book.’
- (4b) **Pawlu sa jkoll-u hobza.**  
Pawlu have.FUT-3SG.M loaf  
‘Pawlu will have a loaf.’