

Existential predication and trans-possessive constructions

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1. Introduction

The term ‘existential predication’ is the label most commonly used by linguists to designate predicative constructions illustrated by clauses such as English **There is a book (on the table)**, French **Il y a un livre (sur la table)**, German **Da liegt ein Buch (auf dem Tisch)**, Turkish **(Masada) bir kitap var**, Tswana **Go na le buka (fa tafoleng)**, etc. Cross-linguistically, the predicative constructions illustrated by such clauses differ to a considerable extent both in their formal characteristics and in the precise range of their uses. The property retained here for the definition of existential predication as a comparative concept in the sense of Haspelmath (2010) is their ability to provide an alternative way of encoding the prototypical figure-ground relationships also denoted by plain locational clauses such as English **The book is on the table**, French **Le livre est sur la table**, German **Das Buch liegt auf dem Tisch**, Turkish **Kitap masadadır**, Tswana **Buka e fa tafoleng**. What distinguishes existential clauses from plain locational clauses is a different perspectivization of figure-ground relationships, and the contrast between existential predication in the sense given here to this term and plain locational predication shows some analogy with the active / passive alternation in the encoding of events involving two participants.¹

An important precision about this definition is that, by ‘prototypical figure-ground relationships’, I mean *episodic* spatial relationships between a *concrete* entity conceived as *movable* (the figure) and another concrete entity (the ground) conceived as occupying a fixed position in the space, or at least as being *less easily movable* than the figure, as in **The dog is under the tree** or **The book is on the table**.

This means that clauses such as **There is a pond in front of our house** or **There is a stain on the mirror** are instantiations of the existential predicative construction of English **There is N (Loc)**, but are not prototypical existential clauses, in the sense that, according to the definition adopted here, the ability to encode the relationships they describe is not decisive in identifying a predicative construction as ‘existential’. In languages sensitive to the distinction between stage-level and individual-level presence (i.e., in languages that use or tend to use distinct constructions for **There are dogs in the garden** and **There are lions in Africa**), the construction retained here as ‘existential’ is that used to encode the episodic presence of an entity at some place. Constructions that may provide translation equivalents of English **there is** in some of their uses but are not available to express things like **There are dogs in the garden** (such as French **Il est N (Loc)**, **Il existe N (Loc)**, or German **Es gibt N (Loc)**) are not instantiations of the comparative concept ‘existential predication’ on which this study is based.

¹ On the notion of perspectivization, cf. the papers on existential predication co-authored by Borschev and Partee (Borschev and Partee 2002, Partee and Borschev 2004, Partee and Borschev 2007), whose influence has been crucial in the elaboration of the conception of existential predication underlying this presentation.

Many languages (probably the majority of the world's languages) do not have an existential predicative construction really distinct from the locational predicative construction, and possessive predicative constructions involving an existential or locational/existential predicator, in which the possessor has oblique-like coding, and the possessee is encoded like the figure in existential predication, are extremely common cross-linguistically. There is however a substantial minority of the world's languages in which the predicator found in existential constructions is shared by a possessive construction partially or fully aligned with the basic transitive construction, with two possible types of historical explanations: either the existential construction developed from a pre-existing trans-possessive 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), or the possessive construction was initially aligned with existential predication, 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 the typology of predicative possession (Section 2) and existential predication (Section 3), Section 4 is devoted to a discussion of the relationship between existential predication, possessive predication, and transitive coding (Section 4). Section 5 summarizes the conclusions.

2. The typology of predicative possession

2.1. Introductory remarks

Possession is understood here as a prototypical concept whose definition relies on empathy hierarchy (also known as animacy hierarchy or indexability hierarchy):²

SAP > non-SAP
human > non human
animate > inanimate
individual object > substance
object > location
entity > proposition

Possession is an asymmetric relationship between a possessor and a possessee. The prototypical possessor is at the top of the hierarchy, i.e. it is a highly individuated human, and the prototypical possessee is a concrete entity, but not necessarily highly individuated, and not necessarily located at a particular point of the hierarchy, that has with the possessor some privileged relationship on the basis of which it can be viewed as an element of the possessor's *personal sphere*. The precise nature of the relationships that may allow considering an entity as included in the personal sphere of a possessor can be extremely diverse, depending on the nature of this entity. However, possessive constructions encode the abstract notion of possession rather than the concrete and precise relationships that justifies including the possessee in the personal sphere of the possessor: in a typical possessive construction, the precise nature of the relationship between the possessor and the possessee can only be inferred from lexical and contextual information.

In addition to prototypical possession, possessive constructions are commonly extended to the encoding of relationships between entities whose characteristics depart more or less from those of a prototypical possessor and a prototypical possessee (as in Spanish **silla de madera** 'wooden chair' semantically very far from prototypical possession, but encoded like **silla de Pedro** 'Pedro's

² There is a huge literature dealing with the questions raised by the study of the aspects of language structure involving the notion of possession. For a well-informed and relatively recent survey whose inspiration is compatible with the views underlying this presentation, see Heine (1997).

chair’), and important cross-linguistic variation is observed in the possible extensions of the use of possessive constructions to non-prototypical situations.

Possessive relationships may appear in one of the following ways in linguistic structure:

- in a referential act, a possessive relationship may be used to specify the possessee by its relation to the possessor, as in **the man’s hat**, or vice versa, as in **the man with a hat**;
- in a predicative act, a possessive relationship may be predicated on the possessee, as in **The hat is the man’s** (predication of belonging), or on the possessor, as in **The man has a hat** (ascription of possession);
- in the encoding of situations in which a participant is indirectly affected by virtue of being the possessor of a directly affected participant, the two participants in question may be encoded as two distinct terms of the predicative construction (external possession, as in Spanish **Se me rompieron las gafas** ‘My glasses broke’, lit. ‘The glasses broke to me’).

Predicative possession is the term commonly used for predicative constructions expressing ascription of possession.

Given the cross-linguistic variation in the formal characteristics of predicative constructions, defining types of predicative possession according to their intrinsic formal characteristics would make no sense. Similarly, if one accepts the idea that grammatical relations are language-specific, one must reject any cross-linguistic characterization of types of predicative possession based on notions such as subject or object. The only possible basis of a typology of predicative possession is the observation of formal similarities or differences between the coding properties of predicative possession and those of other functional types of predication.³

In the typology of predicative possession put forward here, four main types are recognized: trans-possessive, loc-possessive, com-possessive, and incorp-possessive.

2.2. The trans-possessive type

In this type, 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.)⁴

a. **Faató ye kín-óo tábí kew-ó-lu ye.**

Fatou CPL.POS meal-D cook man-D-PL BEN

‘Fatou cooked the meal for the men.’

b. **Faató ye báadíŋ-o-lú soto ñiŋ saatéw-o to.**

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

‘Fatou has relatives in this village.’

This type is very common in the languages of the world, but the verbs/predicators it involves 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.

³ The same remark applies to the typology of existential predication discussed in Section 3.

⁴ 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.

(2) Spanish (pers.doc.)

a. **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.’

b. **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, trans-possessive 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 4.3.

2.3. The loc-possessive type

This type is defined as involving an existential or locational/existential predicator, the possessee being encoded like the figure (the entity whose presence at some place is asserted) in existential predication. Subtypes can be distinguished depending on the coding of the possessor.

2.3.1. Loc-possessive constructions with genitive coding of the possessor

In this subtype, the possessor shows the same coding properties (genitive flagging and/or indexation on the possessee) as in adnominal possession.

(3) Turkish (pers.doc.)

a. **Murat’ın otomobil-i**

Murat-GEN car-CSTR

‘Murat’s car.’

b. **Murat’ın otomobil-i var.**

Murat-GEN car-CSTR EXIST

‘Murat has a car.’ lit. ‘There is of Murat his car.’

2.3.2. Loc-possessive constructions with oblique-like coding of the possessor

In loc-possessive constructions, the possessor may show various types of coding also found in the coding of adjuncts in transitive predication. In particular, it may be coded like the ground (or spatial landmark) in locational/existential predication. Formally, as illustrated by Ex. (4), such possessive clauses are completely identical to existential clauses.

(4) Lezgi (Haspelmath 1993)

a. **Ali stoldi-q^h acuq’-nawa.**

Ali table-behind sit-PRF

‘Ali is sitting at (lit. ‘behind’) a table.’

b. **I q’üzeka-q^h q^hsan xzan awa.**

DEM old_man-behind good family be_in

‘This old man has a good family.’ lit. ‘Behind this old man is a good family.’

A precise characterization of other possible subtypes of non-transitive possessive predications with the possessee encoded like the figure in existential predication is made difficult by the particularities of the case/adposition systems of individual languages. However, in many cases, the encoding of the possessor can straightforwardly be characterized as involving an adposition or case typically used to encode either destination, as in (5), or accompaniment, as in (6).

- (5) Latvian (Veksler and Jurik 1975)

Brālim ir motocikls.

brother.DAT be.PRS.3SG motorbike

‘My brother has a motorbike.’ lit. ‘To my brother is a motorbike.’

- (6) Welsh (Rhys Jones 2000)

Mae car gyda fi.

be.PRS.3 car with 1SG

‘I have a car.’ lit. ‘A car is with me.’

2.4. The com-possessive type

In this type, illustrated by Ex. (7), the possessor is encoded like the individual to which the relationship with a companion is ascribed in comitative predication (as **John** in **John is with his children**), whereas the possessee is encoded like the companion.

- (7) Swahili (pers.doc.)

Hamisi a-na wa-toto wa-wili.

CL1.Hamisi CL1-with CL2-child CL2-two

‘Hamisi has two children.’ lit. ‘Hamisi is with two children.’

2.5. The incorp-possessive type

In the incorporating type of possessive predication, the noun referring to the possessee cannot be analyzed as the head of an NP in a construction including two slots for NPs, and must be analyzed as converted into a one-place predicate meaning ‘(be an) N-owner’ by a ‘propriative’ operator.

For example, Kalaallisut (or West Greenlandic) has a suffix **-qar** converting nouns into intransitive verbs ‘be an N-owner’ (propriative verbs) that assign the role of possessor to their sole argument, encoded as a noun phrase in the zero case and cross-referenced on the verb, as in (8). In other languages, possessive predications of this type involve derived adjectives rather than verbs.

- (8) Kalaallisut (Van Geenhoven 1998)

Angut taana illu-qar-puq.

man that house-PROPR-IND.3SG

‘That man has a house.’

2.5. Others

Some languages have possessive predications with very specific coding characteristics, which show only partial formal similarities with other functional types of predication, and cannot be unequivocally classified as belonging to one of the types presented in the previous sections. However, there would not be much sense in refining the classification by adding as many minor types as necessary to make the classification exhaustive. In a strictly synchronic approach to predicative possession typology, the best way of dealing with such constructions is to acknowledge their specificity, and to classify them as atypical or hybrid constructions. It is only in a diachronic framework that their analysis can be carried out properly. In this perspective, a particularly plausible analysis is that possessive predications with atypical combinations of coding characteristics constitute transitional stages in a process of *have*-drift, a type of evolution by which the coding characteristics of the possessor and the possessee in non-transitive possessive predications tend to align with those of the agent and the patient in transitive predication. This question will be discussed in Section 4.3.

2.6. Topicality and predicative possession typology

The proposals for a typology of predicative possession that have been published so far (including Creissels 1979, Heine 1997, and Stassen 2009) recognize as a distinct type a ‘topic possessive’ type. This type has in common with the loc-possessive type that it involves an existential or locational/existential predicator, and the possessee is encoded like the entity whose presence at some place is asserted in existential predication. Its distinguishing feature is that the possessor is encoded as a framing topic: *As for Possessor, there is Possessee*.

Unquestionably, possessor topicalization is a very usual strategy in the possessive clauses that do not belong to types in which the syntactic treatment of the possessor designates it as the default topic. For example, Japanese has a loc-possessive construction showing particularities to the analysis of which we will return later (Section 4.3.3). The alignment of this construction with existential predication is clearly apparent in Ex. (9a). However, in the possessive clauses of Japanese, the possessor NP is very often marked by the topic marker **wa**, whose presence makes the case marker **ni** optional, as in (9b). It would not be correct to analyze Japanese clauses such as **Taroo wa kuruma ga aru** as belonging to a distinct ‘topic possessive’ type, since the deletion of a case marker in the presence of the topic marker **wa** can be observed in other constructions.

(9) Japanese (Keidan 2008)

a. **Taroo ni kuruma ga aru.**

Taroo LOC car SUBJ be_at
‘Taroo has a car.’

b. **Taroo (ni) wa kuruma ga aru.**

Taroo LOC TOP car SUBJ be_at
‘Taroo has a car.’

The position I defend now is that, more generally, the recognition of ‘topic possessives’ as a distinct type of predicative possession results from a confusion between concrete clauses and predicative constructions conceived as units of a more abstract nature serving as the input for operations such as topicalization. In languages like Japanese, the overt marking of topics prevents confusion, but in other languages the distinction between topicalized possessor phrases and possessor phrases occupying an argumental position may be problematic.

For example, in Mandarin Chinese, a language often mentioned as a typical illustration of the ‘topic possessive’ type, it is notoriously difficult to distinguish the topic position at the left periphery of clauses from the argumental position of subject. Since **yǒu** combined with a single NP expresses ‘there is’, it may be tempting to analyze (10a) as resulting from the addition of a framing topic to a clause involving a monovalent predicate assigning the role of figure to its argument: ‘As for him/her, there is a book.’ However, in questions, Mandarin Chinese only allows the in-situ strategy, and framing topics cannot be questioned. Consequently, if **tā** in (10a) could only be interpreted as a framing topic, (10b) should not be possible. The fact that the identity of the possessor can be questioned by means of a construction in which **yǒu** is preceded by **shéi** ‘who’ excludes the analysis of the possessive reading of **yǒu** as resulting from the addition of a framing topic representing an individual to a existential predicator only able to assign the semantic roles of figure and ground.

(10) Mandarin Chinese (Hilary Chappell, pers.com.)

a. **Tā yǒu shū.**

3SG have book
‘He/she has a book.’

- b. **Shéi yǒu shū?**
 who have book
 ‘Who has a book?’

Possessive **yǒu** can only be analyzed as assigning the role of possessor to an NP occupying the argument position commonly analyzed as the subject position in Mandarin Chinese syntax, and the role of possessee to the NP that follows it. In other words, in its possessive use, **yǒu** is a bivalent verb whose coding frame is aligned with that of typical transitive verbs.⁵

More generally, recognizing ‘topic possessives’ as a distinct type of predicative construction encoding ascription of possession would imply the existence of languages in which the semantic role of possessor would never be assigned in argumental position. In such languages, the possessor could only be encoded as a framing topic whose interpretation relies on pragmatic mechanisms, and would not be accessible to the mechanisms to which framing topics are not accessible, such as questioning. It seems therefore probable that the cases of ‘topic possessives’ that have been reported, either result from a confusion between the extra-clausal position of framing topic and an argumental position in clause-initial position, or constitute the topicalized variant of a possessive construction which in its non-topicalized variant includes an argumental position for possessor NPs elsewhere in the clause.

However, the rejection of the ‘topic possessive’ type as a distinct type in a synchronic typology of predicative possession does not contradict the observation that, in loc-possessive constructions, many languages tend to topicalize possessors, and that, consequently, topicalization may play a important role in the evolutions affecting this type of predicative possession, as will be discussed in Section 4.3.

3. The typology of existential predication

3.1. Languages devoid of dedicated existential predicative construction

In a typology of existential predication, the first distinction is between languages having a special existential construction distinct from plain locational predication, and languages in which no such predicative construction exists.

Many languages (probably the majority of the world’s languages) do not have an existential predicative construction really distinct from the locational predicative construction. For example, in Welsh, the construction **mae N Loc** expresses locational predication but is also used in contexts in which other languages tend to use a dedicated existential construction. In this construction, definiteness marking of the subject is the only difference between the Welsh equivalents of English locational and existential clauses – Ex. (11).

(11) Welsh (Rhys Jones 2000)

- a. **Mae ‘r plant yn yr ysgol.**
 be.PRS.3 DEF children in DEF school
 ‘The children are at school.’

⁵ One may object that possessive **yǒu** is not a canonical transitive verb, since it cannot be found in the *Subject bá Object Verb* construction. However, it is important to remember that transitive verbs of possession, even those whose transitive origin is unquestionable, are rarely if ever perfectly canonical transitive verbs, as already illustrated in Section 2.2 by Spanish **tener**. Consequently, if one accepts analyzing Spanish **tener** as a transitive verb with an irregular behavior in differential object marking, one should consider the possibility of a similar analysis for Mandarin Chinese **yǒu**. Moreover, the fact that, historically, possessive **yǒu** probably derives from existential **yǒu**, cannot be used as an argument against the analysis of possessive **yǒu** as a trans-possessive construction, since the transitivization of initially non-transitive possessive constructions (or *have-drift*) is a common type of evolution.

b. **Mae plisman ar y sgwâr.**

be.PRS.3 policeman on DEF square

‘There is a policeman in the square.’

Similarly, in Mandinka, semantic distinctions more or less similar to those expressed by the choice between locational predication and existential predication in other languages can only be suggested by adding the focus marker **le** to one of the two terms of locational predication – Ex (12).

(12) Mandinka (pers.doc.)

a. **Wul-óo be yír-ôo kóto.**

dog-D LCOP tree-D under

‘The dog is under the tree.’ or ‘There is a dog under the tree.’

b. **Wul-óo le be yír-ôo kóto.**

dog-D FOC LCOP tree-D under

‘There is a dog under the tree.’ or ‘It is the dog that is under the tree.’

(in French, ‘Il y a le chien sous l’arbre’ would be another possible translation)

c. **Wul-óo be yír-óo le kóto.**

dog-D LCOP tree-D FOC under

‘The dog is under the tree.’ Or ‘It is under the tree that the dog is.’

Basque – Ex. (13) – is another example of a language devoid of dedicated existential predication, in which however mere permutations of constituents are available to express modifications of information structure implying the de-topicalization of the term that has the greatest propensity to be interpreted as the topic.

(13) Basque (pers.doc.)

a. **Parke-a ibai-ondo-an dago.**

park-SG river-side-SG.LOC be.PRS.3SG

‘The park is next to the river.’

b. **Ibai-ondo-an parke eder bat dago.**

river-side-SG.LOC park lovely one be.PRS.3SG

‘There is a lovely park next to the river.’

3.2. Exploc-existentials

Exploc-existential constructions are characterized by the presence of an expletive locative, either alone or combined with a predicator also found in locational predication (and possibly in identificational predication too). By ‘expletive locative’, I mean an element generally used with a meaning such as ‘there’ or ‘in it’, but whose only function in existential predication is to distinguish existential predication from other types of predication. Crucially, in existential predication, the expletive locative is not interpreted as referring to a specific place, and co-occurs with a referential locative expression fulfilling the function of ground, even if the meaning it carries in other constructions is in contradiction with that of the referential locative expression it co-occurs with. Ex. (14) illustrates a construction of this type in Italian.

(14) Italian (pers.doc.)

a. **La chiave è sul tavolo.**

the key is on.the table

‘The key is on the table.’

- b. **C'è una chiave sul tavolo.**
 there_{expl}-is a key on.the table
 'There is a key on the table.'

This type of existential predication is rare in the languages of the world, but due to its presence in some major Germanic and Romance languages, there is a huge literature devoted to its syntactic analysis.

3.3. Trans-poss-existentials

Trans-poss-existentials are defined as existential constructions involving a predicator also used in a trans-possessive 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 (15a). 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. (15b). Ex. (16) illustrates a trans-poss-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.

(15) Greek (pers.doc.)

- a. **Ta chōriá den échoun neró.**
 the villages NEG have.PRS.3PL water.ACC
 'The villages don't have water.'

- b. **Den eíche Germanóus sto chōrió.**
 NEG have.PST.3SG Germans.ACC in.the village
 'There were no Germans in the village.' (also interpretable as 'He/she did not have Germans in the village.' in an appropriate context)

(16) Palikur (Launey 2003: 80)

- a. **Nah kadahan aynesa karukri.**
 I have some money
 'I have some money.'

- b. **Kadahan im ahakwa un.**
 have fish in water
 'There are fish in the water.'

Contrary to still widespread opinion according to which trans-possessive constructions, and consequently trans-poss-existential constructions, are rare outside Europe,⁶ trans-possessives are quite frequent in the languages of the world, and trans-poss-existentials are not rare. Trans-poss-existentials are common, not only in Central and South Europe, but also in the Northern part of Sub-Saharan Africa (particularly among Atlantic languages), in South-East Asia, and among Pidgin and Creole languages.

⁶ 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.

The predominance of trans-poss-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, trans-poss-existentials are found in 19 out of the 26 Pidgin and Creole varieties whose lexifier language is English, i.e. a language which does not have this type of existential predication.

3.4. Incorp-poss-existentials

Incorp-poss-existentials are existential constructions in which the figure is treated like the possessee in an incorporating possessive construction. For example, Kalaallisut has an existential construction involving the third person singular form of propriative verbs derived from the noun referring to the figure, but in which no noun phrase in the zero case is present – Ex. (17b).

(17) Kalaallisut (Van Geenhoven 1998)

a. **Angut taana illu-qar-puq.**
 man that house-PROPR-IND.3SG
 ‘That man has a house.’

b. **Nillataartarfim-mi tallima-nik manne-qar-puq.**
 fridge-LOC five-INSTR.PL egg-PROPR-IND.3SG
 ‘There are five eggs in the fridge.’

Such constructions share with trans-poss-existentials the use of a predicate also used with the meaning ‘has N’. The difference is that, in trans-poss-existentials, this predicate results from the combination of a possessive predicator with a noun phrase encoded like the patient of typical transitive verbs, whereas in the Kalaallisut construction, it results from a derivational operation converting nouns into intransitive verbs meaning ‘be an N-owner’.

3.5. Trans-poss-exploc-existentials

Trans-poss-exploc-existentials share with trans-poss-existentials the use of a predicator also used in a transitive possessive construction, and with exploc-existentials the presence of an expletive locative – Ex. (18).

(18) Occitan (pers.doc.)

I a un can dins l'òrt.
 there_{expl} has a dog in the-garden
 ‘There is a dog in the garden.’

The existential predicator of French **il y a** belongs to this type, but in addition to the expletive locative (**y**) and a third person singular form of **avoir** ‘have’, it includes an expletive subject clitic of third person masculine (**il**).

All the languages in which I have been able to identify an existential predication of this type belong to the Romance family.

3.6. Com-existentials

Com-existentials are existential predications in which the figure is encoded like the phrase representing the companion in comitative predication. Com-existentials are common among Bantu languages – ex. (19), and there is a clear relationship with the possessive use of comitative predication in Bantu languages.

(19) Swahili (pers.doc.)

a. **Hamisi a na kitabu.**

(CL1)Hamisi CL1 with CL7.book

lit. ‘Hamisi he (is) with book.’ → ‘Hamisi has a book.’

b. **Kisima ki na maji.**

CL7.well CL7 with CL6.water

lit. ‘The well it (is) with water.’ → ‘The well has water.’

c. **Kisima-ni m na maji.**

CL7.well-LOC CL18 with CL6.water

lit. ‘at-the-well there (is) with water.’ → ‘There is water in the well.’

d. **Meza-ni pa na kitabu.**

(CL9)table-LOC CL16 with CL7.book

lit. ‘at-the-table there (is) with book.’ → ‘There is a book on the table.’

3.7. Id-existentials

Id-existentials are characterized by the presence of either a dedicated identificational predicator, or an identificational/locational predicator accompanied by a non-locative expletive element also used in identificational clauses equivalent to English **This/that is an N**. Icelandic illustrates this type of existential predication – Ex. (20).

(20) Icelandic (Neijmann 2001, Freeze 2001)

a. **Það er kirkja.**

that is church

‘That is a church.’

b. **Það eru mys í baðkerinu.**

that are mice in bathtub

‘There are mice in the bathtub.’ lit. ‘That are mice in the bathtub.’

This rare type of existential construction makes apparent the semantic relationship between existential predication in the sense of inverse locational predication and identificational predication: in some sense, the existential perspective on figure-ground relationships is tantamount to identifying an entity present at a given place. This connection is even more obvious in the variant of the id-existential type found in Tahitian (Polynesian). In most Polynesian languages, the figure phrase in existential predication is introduced by an expletive locative or by an existential predicator that historically derives from an expletive locative, but Tahitian uses the identificational predicator *e* in a construction whose literal meaning is ‘That at/of Loc is N’. Ex. (21a) illustrates the Tahitian identificational predication, and Ex. (21b-c) illustrate the two variants of existential predication. In both variants, the word glossed ART(icle) can be viewed as marking the nominalization of a prepositional phrase.

(21) Tahitian (Lazard and Peltzer 2000)

a. **E fa’ehau terā ta’ata.**

ICOP soldier DEM man

‘This man is a soldier.’

b. **E pape te-i terā vāhi.**

ICOP water ART-at DEM place

‘There is water at that place.’ lit. ‘It is water, that at that place.’

c. **E pape te-o terā vāhi.**

ICOP water ART-of DEM place

‘There is water at that place.’ lit. ‘It is water, that of that place.’

3.8. Existential predications involving a dedicated existential predicator

By ‘dedicated existential predicator’, I mean an existential predicator in a construction that cannot be analyzed as an instance of one of the types of existential predication presented in the previous sections, and that cannot be analyzed as having the same kind of relationship with another type of predicative construction either.⁷

Ex. (22) illustrates the distinction between locational predication and existential predication involving a dedicated existential predicator in Turkish.

(22) Turkish (pers.doc.)

a. **Otel şehir-de(-dir).**

hotel town-LOC(-be)

‘The hotel is in the town.’

b. **Otel şehir-de değil(-dir).**

hotel town-LOC NEG(-be)

‘The hotel is not in the town.’

c. **Bu şehir-de bir otel var.**

DEM town-LOC one hotel EXIST

‘There is a hotel in this town.’

d. **Bu şehir-de otel yok.**

DEM town-LOC hotel EXIST.NEG

‘There is no hotel in this town.’

Dedicated existential predicators are quite widespread in the world’s languages. A priori, existential predications belonging to any of the other types may undergo evolutions that convert them into existential constructions involving dedicated existential predicators, but the emergence of a dedicated existential predicator may also be the result of changes in the source construction.

Serbo-Croat **ima** ‘there is’ illustrates the first possibility. Historically, **ima** is the third person singular of **imati** ‘have’, but as an existential predicator, **ima** has acquired distinct case-assigning properties, and the coding of the figure in the construction of **ima** ‘there is’ has ceased to be aligned with that of the possessee in the construction of **ima** ‘he/she has’. Ex. (23) shows that, in the singular, the zero (‘nominative’) marking of the figure in the existential use of **ima** contrasts with the accusative marking of the possessee in the possessive construction.

(23) Serbo-Croat (Creissels 2013: 467-468)

a. **Ima jedna cura u sokaku mome.**

EXIST one.SG.F girl.SG in street.SG.PREP my.SG.M.LOC

‘There is a girl in my street.’ (title of a song)

b. **Ima jedna krčma u planini.**

EXIST one.SG.F inn.SG in mountain.SG.PREP

‘There is an inn in the mountain.’ (title of a song)

c. **Ima jednu krčmu u planini.**

have.PRS.3SG one.SG.F.ACC inn.SG.ACC in mountain.SG.PREP

‘(S)he has an inn in the mountain.’

This change probably started with the re-analysis of accusative forms homonymous with the nominative. Note that, in spite of its possibility of nominative marking, the figure NP in the Serbo-Croat existential construction cannot be analyzed as an inverted subject in a more or less canonical intransitive construction, since in the plural, the verb does not show plural agreement, and the

⁷ This definition does not exclude the possibility that a dedicated existential predicator may have other uses resulting from divergent grammaticalizations from the same source, such as for example that of auxiliary verb.

genitive must be used in conditions in which intransitive subjects (even in postverbal position) are normally in the nominative – Ex. (24b).

(24) Serbo-Croat (Creissels 2013: 467-468)

- a. **Ima lijepa djevojka u ovoj kući.**
 EXIST pretty.SG.F girl.SG in this.SG.F.PREP house.SG.PREP
 ‘There is a pretty girl in this house.’
- b. **Ima lijepih djevojaka u ovom selu.**
 EXIST pretty.PL.GEN girl.PL.GEN in this.SG.N.PREP village.SG.PREP
 ‘There are pretty girls in this village.’

The case of a dedicated existential predicator whose status is the consequence of a change in the trans-possessive construction from which it originates can be illustrated by Spanish **haber**. The existential use of **haber** developed from its use as a transitive verb of possession, and no change has occurred in its construction. What occurred is that **haber** is not used as a lexical verb anymore, and has been replaced by **tener** in the function of transitive verb of possession, which automatically converted **haber** into a dedicated existential predicator – Ex. (25).

(25) Spanish (pers.doc.)

- a. **Había un problema muy grave.**
 EXIST.IMPF.3SG a problem very serious
 ‘There was a very serious problem.’
- b. **Tenía un problema muy grave.**
 have.IMPF.3SG a problem very serious
 ‘He/she had a very serious problem.’

4. Existential predication, possessive predication, and transitivity

4.1. Introductory remarks

The notion of possession defined as inclusion of an entity (the possessee) in the personal sphere of an individual (the possessor) has an obvious affinity with the notion of location at some place, and the *figure – ground* relationship encoded by locational / existential predications has nothing in common with the *agent – patient* relationship in prototypical transitive events. This explains why non-transitive possessive predications aligned with locational / existential predication are so common. However, their predominance is far from absolute.

Some decades ago, it was commonly admitted that trans-possessive constructions constitute a typological oddity of modern European languages, and that locative, existential and possessive predications are normally variants of a single non-transitive construction, but such views are not supported by cross-linguistic data. Diachronically, the explanation lies in the relative frequency of the following three types of evolution:

- (a) the semantic change by which transitive verbs with meanings such as ‘take’, ‘grasp’, ‘get’, ‘hold’, ‘bear’, etc. are converted into verbs assigning the roles of possessor and possessee to their A-argument and P-argument, respectively;
- (b) the creation of existential constructions via the impersonalization of trans-possessive constructions;
- (c) the acquisition of transitive features by possessive constructions that initially belonged to the loc-possessive type (have-drift).

Crucially, the distribution of each of these three types of evolution in the languages of the world excludes any conditioning by the structural properties of the languages or their socio-cultural environment.⁸ In this respect, the only really intriguing fact (for which I have no explanation to put forward) is the importance of the (a) and (b) types in the formation of Creole languages.

4.2. From trans-possessives to trans-poss-existentials

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

X has Y

- > **Ø has Y**⁹ ‘(at some place) they have Y’ (where *they* must be understood as non-specific)
- > **Ø has Y** ‘(at some place) Y is available
- > **Ø has Y** ‘(at some place) there is Y’

According to this analysis, the crucial move in the evolution from trans-possessive constructions to trans-poss-existential constructions is the routinization of the expression of availability at some place by means of an impersonalized variant of the trans-possessive construction. In this perspective, Krio **den get** ‘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.

Such constructions initially express possession by a non-specific possessor, which favors the development of readings 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. In other words, in the argument structure of an impersonalized trans-possessive predicator, reference to a place at which some entity is available may tend to substitute to reference to an unspecified individual having the entity in question in his/her personal sphere. The impersonalized trans-possessive construction may thus become 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.

In a second move, the use of the construction originating from the impersonalization of a trans-possessive construction extends to the expression of episodic presence of an entity at some place, which means that the construction is reanalyzed as an existential construction. In the introduction, I have insisted on the fact that the definition of the comparative concept of existential predication I have retained for this study does not include permanent presence (or availability) at some place. However, the closeness between these two notions is obvious, and constructions identifiable as existential according to the definition adopted here can often be also used to express permanent presence. Consequently, there is no difficulty in conceiving the expression of permanent presence at some place as an intermediate stage in the conversion of an impersonalized trans-possessive construction into an existential construction.

⁸ This aspect of the question must be emphasized, given the popularity enjoyed by Meillet’s theory according to which the development of trans-possessive constructions in Indo-European languages was the consequence of changes in the social organization of Indo-European peoples.

⁹ 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 function is to indicate that the possessor must be interpreted as non-specific.

4.3. Transitivity of loc-possessive constructions

4.3.1. General remarks on the have-drift

Diachronically, non-transitive possessive predications may acquire coding properties typical of transitive predication (*'have-drift'*). As rightly observed by Stassen (2009: 209), in a diachronic perspective, there is a clear dissymmetry between trans-possessives 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 trans-possessive type, and may eventually be converted into a typical trans-possessive construction. By contrast, in the history of a language, a trans-possessive construction may be replaced by a construction belonging to another type, but there is no example of a trans-possessive construction affected by changes analyzable in terms of drift toward another type of predicative possession.

The conversion of com-possessives into trans-possessives is particularly easy to imagine, since for example in a language with A V P / S V constituent order, if comitative phrases are flagged by a preposition, and if objects of verbs and complements of prepositions are coded alike, the conversion of com-possessives into trans-possessives boils down to reanalyzing the complement of the comitative preposition **with** as the object of a transitive verb form **is_with**:

PR is [with PE] > PR [is with] PE¹⁰ (**PR** = possessor, **PE** = possessee)

but the transitivity of loc-possessives and incorp-possessives is attested too. Given the topic of this presentation, the remainder of this section is restricted to the transitivity of loc-possessives.¹¹

4.3.2. Development of a P-like coding of the possessee in loc-possessive constructions

Evolutions by virtue of which the possessee in a loc-possessive 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 (26) may suggest that, in Finnish, predicative possession is a typical instantiation of the loc-possessive type, and that, syntactically, both the figure NP in the existential construction and the possessee NP in the possessive construction are inverted subjects.

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

a. **Kadulla on auto.**

street.ADESS be.PRS.3SG car

'There is a car in the street.'

b. **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

¹⁰ In particular, the com-possessive type is the most widespread type of predicative possession in the Bantu language family, but the reanalysis of the sequence **be with** as a transitive verb of possession is not rare among Bantu languages. For example, in Cwabo, a verb 'have' which transparently derives from **be with** contrasts synchronically with the sequence **be with**, which can only be interpreted in its literal comitative meaning – Rozenn Guérois, pers.com.

¹¹ Note however that, among the examples quoted above, the trans-possessive construction of Palikur (Ex. (16)) illustrates the case of a trans-possessive construction resulting from the transitivity of a construction that initially belonged to the incorp-possessive type: **kadahan** 'have' is originally a monovalent predicate 'be the owner of something' consisting of the prefix **ka-** 'endowed with' and the generic noun **dahan** 'possession', but it is now used in a construction in which it is followed by a noun phrase to which the role of possessee is assigned.

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 by Ex. (26a), 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 by Ex. (27), in the possessive construction, personal pronouns in possessee role are usually in the accusative case, which excludes analyzing them as inverted subjects.

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

- a. **Pekalla on hänet.**
 Pekka.ADESS be.PRS.3SG 3SG.ACC
 ‘Pekka has her.’
- b. **?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 predication.

4.3.3. Loss of oblique-like coding of the possessee in loc-possessive constructions

Prototypical possessors have a high degree of inherent topicality, which may explain a tendency to topicalize them in possessive clauses of the loc-possessive type. The point is that, in this type of predicative possession (contrary to the other three types) the syntactic treatment of the possessor does not imply the status of default topic. Furthermore, the reanalysis of topicalized phrases as subjects is a common phenomenon in the evolution of languages. Consequently, and somewhat paradoxically, loc-possessives are at the same time a particularly frequent type of predicative possession, a type whose functional motivation is obvious, but also a type particularly prone to undergoing changes triggered by the fact that the coding of the possessor in this type of predicative possession appears to be at odds with the inherent topicality of this participant.

Let’s take for example the case of a language in which existential predication can be schematized as **EXIST FIG (at GR)** (**FIG** = figure, **EXIST** = existential (or locational/existential) predicator, **at** = spatial adposition of case affix, **GR** = ground). If the same construction is used to encode predicative possession, given the inherent topicality of prototypical possessors, it is natural that, in possessive clauses, the possessor NP tends to move to a position at the left periphery of the clause:

EXIST PE at PR > **at PR / EXIST PE** (PE = possessee, PR = possessor)

NPs occupying a position at the left periphery of the clause are commonly involved in two phenomena variously regulated by the individual languages: they may appear devoid of 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 topicalized variant of a loc-possessive construction may take one of the following two forms:

- (a) **PR / EXIST PE**
- (b) **PR / at pr EXIST PE** (pr = pronoun resuming the topicalized possessor phrase)

Transposed into English, this means that a construction which is in principle something like **There is a book at John** for ‘John has a book’ may tend to take one of the following forms (in which the topicalized possessor may be marked for its semantic role, or marked as a topic, or not marked at all):

- At John, there is a book.**
- John, at him there is a book.**
- Speaking of John, there is a book.**
- John, there is a book.**

4.3.4. *Reanalysis of PR / EXIST PE constructions that are initially the topicalized variant of a loc-possessive construction*

A construction schematizable as **PR / EXIST PE** which is initially the topicalized variant of a loc-possessive construction may generalize as the unmarked way of constructing assertive possessive clauses. This implies reanalyzing the topicalized possessor NP as occupying an argumental position in which it is assigned the role of possessor, and the existential predicator as a polysemous predicator occurring in two distinct constructions:

- an existential construction **EXIST FIG (at GR)** in which it assigns the role of ground to an oblique-marked NP,
- a possessive construction **PR POSS PE** in which it assigns the role of possessor to an unflagged NP that precedes it.

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. In an language 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, the immediate result of the reanalysis of the topicalized variant of a loc-possessive construction as discursively unmarked is the emergence of a possessive predicator which may differ in some other respects from canonical transitive verbs, but which assigns to the possessor and possessee NPs coding characteristics aligned with those of A and P in the basic transitive construction.

This is probably what occurred in Mandarin Chinese, since in the history of this language, existential **yǒu** is attested before possessive **yǒu** (Hilary Chappell and Alain Peyraube, pers.com.).

At this point it is interesting to mention some details in the syntactic properties of the possessive predicative construction of Japanese. As already mentioned, Japanese has a possessive predicative construction belonging to the loc-possessive type with a variant in which the possessor is topicalized, and in which the presence of the topic marker **wa** allows the deletion of the case marker **ni** – Ex. (9), repeated here as (28).

(28) Japanese (Keidan 2008)

- a. **Taroo ni kuruma ga aru.**
 Taroo LOC car SUBJ be_at
 ‘Taroo has a car.’

- b. **Taroo (ni) wa kuruma ga aru.**
 Taroo LOC TOP car SUBJ be_at
 ‘Taroo has a car.’

There are however some interesting contrasts between the syntactic properties of possessive and existential clauses. In particular, the deletion of the case marker **ni** in the presence of the topic marker **wa**, which is according to Keidan (2008) the preferred pattern in the possessive construction for many speakers, is impossible in the existential construction – Ex. (29).

(29) Japanese (Keidan 2008)

- a. **Heya *(ni) wa otoko ga iru.**
 room (LOC) TOP man SUBJ be_at
 ‘Speaking of the room, there is a man there.’¹²

Crucially, in Japanese, the deletion of a case marker in the presence of the topic marker is typically observed with the case markers **ga** (subject) and **o** (object). This probably explains the existence of a variant of the possessive construction in which the possessor is flagged by **ga** (glossed here as FOC, since this construction is used if the possessor needs to be focused).

(30) Japanese (Keidan 2008)

- a. **Taroo ga kuruma ga aru.**
 Taroo FOC car SUBJ be_at
 ‘It is Taroo who has the car.’

To summarize, the possessive predicative construction of Japanese, which superficially looks like a well-behaved loc-possessive construction, differs in crucial respects from the existential construction from which it derives. Japanese has particularities that hinder a straightforward realignment of the topicalized variant of the loc-possessive construction with the basic transitive construction (in particular, the overt marking of the possessee NP by the subject particle **ga**), but the specificities in the behavior of the possessor NP can be analyzed as arising from a tendency to align its behavior with that of the agent in the basic transitive construction.

4.3.5. *Reanalysis of PR / at pr EXIST PE constructions that are initially the topicalized variant of a loc-possessive construction*

Maltese, analyzed by Comrie (1989), and other Arabic varieties constitute a well-known case of this type of have-drift.¹³ Originally, Arabic has a predicative construction expressing possession that straightforwardly belongs to the loc-possessive type, and this construction is 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. (31a). However, a variant with the possessor NP topicalized and resumed by a pronoun suffixed to the preposition is possible – Ex. (31b). In both cases, ‘be’ agrees with the possessee phrase, in the same way as it agrees with the figure phrase in the existential construction.

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

- a. **Kānat li Zaydin xubzatun.**
 was.F to Zayd.GEN loaf.INDEF
 ‘Zayd had a loaf.’

¹² The distinction between the two verbs glossed here ‘be at’ is that **iru** combines with animate **ga**-marked phrases, whereas **aru** combines with inanimate **ga**-marked phrases.

¹³ See among others Naïm (2003) on have-drift in Levantine Arabic.

- b. **Zaydun kānat la-hu xubzatun.**
 Zayd was.F to-him loaf.INDEF
 ‘Zayd had a loaf.’

Ex. (32) illustrates the variant with the preposition **ʕinda** ‘beside’.

(32) Classical Arabic (Ambros 1969: 89)

- ʕinda l-muʕallimi sayyāratun.**
 beside DEF-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. (31a) and (32) 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. (33). 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.

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

- a. **Il-ktieb ghand Pawlu.**
 DEF-book at Pawlu
 ‘The book is at Pawlu’s.’
- b. ***Ghand Pawlu ktieb.**
 at Pawlu book
 intended: ‘Pawlu has a book.’
- c. **Pawlu ghand-u ktieb.**
 Pawlu have-3SG.M book
 ‘Pawlu has a book.’
- d. **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 loc-possessive 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. (34). 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 loc-possessive construction (as in (31) above) has been lost. This is visible in (34b), since **hobza** is feminine, and ***Pawlu sa tkollu hobza** with feminine agreement is not possible.

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

a. **Pawlu kell-u ktieb.**

Pawlu have.PST-3SG.M book
'Pawlu had a book.'

b. **Pawlu sa jkoll-u hobża.**

Pawlu have.FUT-3SG.M loaf
'Pawlu will have a loaf.'

5. Conclusion

The notion of belonging to the personal sphere of an individual has an obvious affinity with the notion of being located at some place, and this explains why possessive predications more or less aligned with an existential variant of locational predication are so common, but this affinity should not be over-estimated. Some decades ago, it was commonly admitted that transitive verbs of possession constitute a typological oddity of modern European languages, and are virtually absent in the languages spoken in other parts of the world. In a formal syntactic perspective, Bach (1967) termed 'pathological' *have*-predications, and more recently, Freeze (1992) put forward a more elaborate version of the view that locative, existential and possessive predications derive from a single underlying structure in which 'a preposition is the head of the predicate phrase', but such views are not supported by typological data, and the examination of cross-linguistic diachronic data confirms that there is nothing 'pathological' in deviations from this allegedly canonical situation.

There are indeed quite a few well-attested types of historical change resulting in situations in which predicative possession cannot be described as a possible reading of an existential variant of locational predication:

- a semantic change converting 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 development of existential predicative constructions via the impersonalization of trans-possessive constructions;
- the transitivization of possessive predicative constructions initially belonging to the loc-possessive, com-possessive, or incorp-possessive types.

The ambiguity of many types of possessive relationships with respect to the notion of control explains the development of possessive readings of constructions expressing comitative predication, whereas the existence of possessive relationships in which the possessor can be viewed as controlling the relationship explains the development of transitive verbs of possession from transitive verbs expressing meanings such as 'take', 'grasp', 'get', 'hold', 'bear', and may also play a role in the acquisition of transitive features by non-transitive constructions of predicative possession as a way of distinguishing them from their source construction. Another crucial factor in these evolutions, and particularly in the transitivization of loc-possessive constructions, is the inherent topicality of prototypical possessors, which is at odds with their treatment in loc-possessive constructions.

Abbreviations

ACC = accusative, ADESS = adessive, ART = article, BEN = benefactive, CL = noun class, CPL = completive, CSTR = construct form marker, D = default determiner, DAT = dative, DEF = definite, DEM = demonstrative, EXIST = dedicated existential predicator, expl = expletive, F = feminine, FOC = focus marker, FUT = future, GEN = genitive, ICOP = identificational copula, IMPF = imperfect, IND = indicative, INDEF = indefinite, INF = infinitive, INSTR = instrumental, LCOP = locational copula, LOC = locative, M = masculine, N = neuter, NEG = negation marker, PL = plural, POS = positive, PREP = prepositional case, PRF = perfect, PROPR = proprietive, PRS = present, PST = past, SG = singular, SUBJ = subject case marker, TOP = topic marker

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