

Predicative possession in Mande languages

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Abstract. This article discusses the typology of predicative possession in Mande languages and compares the diversity observed in this domain across the Mande language family with that observed elsewhere in the world, in particular in the language families of West Africa that are in contact with the Mande family. Of the two major types of possessive clauses that have been identified in the world's languages, possessive clauses that can be rendered literally as 'In.the.sphere.of Possessor (is) Possessee' are by far the most widespread type in the Mande language family, whereas possessive clauses projected by a transitive 'have' verb are quite marginal. Moreover, possessive clauses that can be rendered literally as 'Possessor's Possessee exists', which constitute a rare type at world's level, are common in South and East Mande.

Résumé. Cet article discute la typologie de la prédication possessive dans les langues mandé et compare la diversité observée dans ce domaine à travers la famille linguistique mandé à ce qui est observé ailleurs dans le monde, en particulier dans les familles de langues d'Afrique de l'Ouest qui sont en contact avec la famille mandé. Des deux types majeurs de phrases possessives qui ont été identifiés dans les langues du monde, les phrases possessives qui peuvent être rendues littéralement comme 'Dans.la.sphère.de Possesseur est Possédé' sont de loin le type le plus répandu dans la famille linguistique mandé, tandis que les phrases possessives projetées par un verbe transitif 'avoir' sont très marginales. En outre, les phrases possessives qui peuvent être rendues littéralement comme 'Possédé de Possesseur existe', qui constituent un type rare à l'échelle mondiale, sont répandues en mandé sud et est.

1. Introduction

1.1. Possession as a linguistic concept

POSSESSION AS A LINGUISTIC CONCEPT refers to constructions involving two nominal terms whose referents, designated as the POSSESSOR and the POSSESSEE, are interpreted as having some kind of privileged relationship on the basis of which the possessee can be viewed as an element of the possessor's PERSONAL SPHERE as this notion was introduced by Bally (1926).¹ The prototypical possessor 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 empathy hierarchy, which has some privileged relationship with the

¹ An English translation of this article (by Christine Béal and Hilary Chappell) was published as Bally (1996).

possessor. The precise nature of the relationships that may allow considering an entity as an element of the personal sphere of a possessor can be extremely diverse, depending on the nature of this entity. Moreover, it is common that constructions identifiable as possessive with reference to some of their uses are also available to express relationships that go well beyond prototypical possession. However, there is consensus that the relationships between human individuals and the following three types of entities constitute the semantic core of the linguistic notion of possession (see in particular Langacker 1995):

- body parts;
- relatives;
- objects that humans may have at their disposal (without necessarily owning them strictly speaking).

The notion of possession manifests itself in noun-modifier constructions (adnominal possession), in predicative constructions, and in external possession constructions.

1.2. Predicative possession: a terminological point

In predicative constructions, a possessive relationship may be predicated on the possessee, as in *The hat is the man's*, or on the possessor, as in *The man has a hat*. The term ‘predicative possession’ is commonly restricted to clauses such as *The man has a hat*, and there is no consensus about the term characterizing clauses such as *The hat is the man's*. The term I propose is INVERSE-POSSESSIVE PREDICATION (as opposed to PLAIN-POSSESSIVE PREDICATION). What justifies the choice of this term is that the perspectivization of the possessive relationship encoded by clauses such as *The hat is the man's* reverses the natural saliency hierarchy between possessor and possessee.² The contrast in perspectivization between plain- and inverse-possessive clauses is comparable to that between plain- and inverse-locational clauses (*The dog is in the garden / There is a dog in the garden*) or between active and passive clauses (*The dog ate the meat / The meat was eaten by the dog*).³

Contrary to plain-possessive predication, inverse-possessive predication has not drawn much attention from linguists in general, and from typologists in particular. The obvious reasons are that inverse-possessive predication is much less frequent in discourse, and shows much less variety in its cross-linguistic manifestations. In general, inverse-possessive predication is encoded as a variety of equative (nominal) predication in which the predicate role is fulfilled by a full adnominal possessive construction (*This book is John's book*), or by an expression variously analyzable as the reduced form of an adnominal possessive construction, such as English *This book is John's* or *This book is mine*.

In the remainder of this article, most of the discussion will be about plain-possessive predication, and in accordance with common practice, the term ‘predicative possession’ without further precision will be used as referring to plain-possessive predication. We will just briefly return to inverse-possessive predication in §6.

² The term APPERTENTIVE has been proposed by Haspelmath (2025) for this type of predicative construction.

³ On the notion of inverse-locational predication, see Creissels (2019).

1.3. A general typology of predicative possession

1.3.1. Preliminary remarks

The classification of predicative possession constructions presented in this section is basically that proposed by Bertinetto, Ciucci & Creissels (2025). It differs from those previously proposed in the literature (in particular Heine (1996, 1997) and Stassen (2009, 2013)) in that it is a purely synchronic typology, consistently based on the morphosyntactic nature of the element responsible for the assignment of the semantic roles of possessor and possessee, in which formal similarities with other functional types of predicative constructions or etymological considerations play no role. The following six types of strategies are distinguished:⁴

- the BIVALENT POSSESSIVE VERB STRATEGY, in which the roles of possessor and possessee are assigned by a bivalent verb to its arguments;
- the PROPRIETIVE DERIVATION STRATEGY, in which a monovalent predicate (verb, adjective or noun) derived from a noun and glossable as ‘(be the) possessor of an N’, assigns the role of possessor to its argument;
- the FLAGGED-POSSESSEE STRATEGY, in which the role of possessor is assigned to an unflagged NP by a case-marked NP or adposition phrase in predicate role referring to the possessee;
- the FLAGGED-POSSESSOR STRATEGY, in which the role of possessee is assigned to an unflagged NP by a case-marked NP or adposition phrase in predicate role referring to the possessor;
- the MODIFIED-POSSESSEE strategy, in which the possessive interpretation of an existential clause follows from the adjunction of possessive indexes or of an adnominal possessive modifier to the argument of an existential predicator.
- the IMPLICIT POSSESSION strategy, in which an unflagged NP adjoined as a topic to an existential clause including nothing that could suggest a possessive interpretation is interpreted as fulfilling the role of possessor, the argument of the existential predicator being then interpreted as fulfilling the role of possessee.

Of these six strategies, illustrated in this section by non-Mande examples, those that have by far the widest distribution, either in genealogical or geographical terms, are the bivalent possessive verb strategy (especially the subtype in which the possessive verb is a transitive verb assigning A coding to the possessor and P coding to the possessee, commonly designated in the literature as HAVE-POSSESSIVE) and the flagged-possessor strategy (especially the subtype in which the case marker or adposition flagging the possessor phrase is found in other constructions with a locative function, commonly designated in the literature as LOCATIONAL POSSESSIVE).

⁴ Here and in the remainder of this article, ‘unflagged NP’ must be understood as ‘NP in a form also used in the extra-syntactic function of quotation or pure designation’.

1.3.2. The bivalent possessive verb strategy

The essential characteristic of this strategy is that the possessor and the possessee are encoded as unflagged NPs (i.e., as NPs in the form also used in the extra-syntactic function of quotation or pure designation), or as NPs flagged as core syntactic terms whose semantic role must be retrieved from the lexical meaning of the verb that projects the clause. Cross-linguistically, the vast majority of bivalent possessive verbs are transitive verbs that assign A-coding to the possessor and P-coding to the possessee, as illustrated in (1), where a possessive clause (b) is compared to a prototypical transitive clause of the same language (a).⁵

(1) Wolof (Wolof, Atlantic, Niger-Congo)

- a. *Tabax nanu lekkool.*
 build PRF.sI:1PL school
 ‘We built a school.’
- b. *Am nanu lekkool.*
 have PRF.sI:1PL school
 ‘We have a school.’

However, bivalent possessive verbs are not always transitive verbs assigning A-coding to the possessor phrase and P-coding to the possessee phrase. For example, as illustrated in (2), Georgian has two possessive verbs (one used with animate possesseees, the other with inanimate possesseees) that invariably assign the cases traditionally designated as dative and nominative to the possessor phrase and the possessee phrase, whereas in the transitive construction of Georgian, the coding of A and P varies according to the tense value expressed by the verb.

(2) Georgian (Kartvelian)

- a. *Vano-s axal-i megobar-i hq'avs.*
 Vano-DAT new-NOM friend-NOM be.in.the.sphere.of.PRS.sI:3SG.ioI:3SG
 ‘Vano has a new friend.’
- b. *Vano-s axal-i saxl-i akvs.*
 Vano-DAT new-NOM house-NOM be.in.the.sphere.of.PRS.sI:3SG.ioI:3SG
 ‘Vano has a new house.’

1.3.3. The proprietive derivation strategy

The proprietive derivation strategy may involve denominal verbs glossable as ‘be the possessor of an N’ (or ‘have an N’) or denominal nouns or adjectives glossable as ‘possessor of an N’ or ‘having an N’. In some languages, the use of proprietive verbs (3) or proprietive nouns/adjectives (4) as one-place predicates assigning the role of possessor to their argument constitutes the standard way of forming possessive clauses.

⁵ The examples for which no source is given are either based on my personal knowledge of the language or drawn from my personal documentation. By personal documentation, I mean data I collected directly from native speakers, or data extracted from various types of sources other than language descriptions or scientific articles (newspapers, Internet, pedagogical grammars, etc.) and checked with the help of native speakers.

- (3) West Greenlandic (Eskimo, Eskimo-Aleut)
Angut taana illu-qar-puq.
man that house-PROPR-IND.sI:3SG
'That man has a house.' lit. 'This man house.has.'
(Van Geenhoven 1998: 25)

- (4) Nahuatl (Aztecan, Uto-Aztecan)
Ni-cal-ê.
sI:1SG-house-PROPR
'I have a house.' lit. 'I am a house-owner.'
(Launey 1981)

The proprietive derivation strategy is common among the indigenous languages of Siberia and the Americas, but relatively rare elsewhere in the world, especially in Africa.

1.3.4. *The flagged-possessee strategy*

In the flagged-possessee strategy, a case-marked NP or adpositional phrase referring to the possessee acts as a non-verbal predicate assigning the role of possessor to an unflagged NP that constitutes its argument, as in (5).

- (5) Hausa (West Chadic, Chadic, Afroasiatic)
Yārō yanà dà fensir̃.
boy sI:3SG.M.COP PSEE pencil
'The boy has a pencil.' lit. 'This boy is in.possession.of a pencil.'
(Newman 2000: 222)

In its use in possessive clauses, the case marker or adposition flagging the possessee phrase, for which the abbreviation PSEE is used here, can be glossed as 'in possession of'. However, in all the cases I am aware of, the case marker or adposition in question is also used to flag comitative adjuncts in verbal predication.

This type of predicative possession is not limited to particular areas or language families, but it is particularly prominent in the Bantu language family, cf. Creissels (2024).

1.3.5. *The flagged-possessor strategy*

In the flagged-possessor strategy, a case-marked NP or adpositional phrase referring to the possessor acts as a non-verbal predicate assigning the role of possessee to an NP that constitutes its argument and is neither flagged nor explicitly encoded as being possessed.

In its use in possessive clauses, the case marker or adposition flagging the possessor phrase, for which the abbreviation PSOR is used here, can be glossed as 'in the personal sphere of'. However, in sharp contrast to the flagged-possessee type, in which the case marker or adposition that flags the possessee phrase in predicate role is invariably found in other constructions with a comitative function, the case marker or adposition that flags the

possessor phrase in the flagged-possessor strategy shows a wide variety of possible functions in the uses it may have in other constructions.

Fon has constructions of this type in which the postposition that flags the possessor phrase specifically refers to personal sphere. Interestingly, this postposition results from the grammaticalization of the noun ‘hand’.

(6) Fon (Gbe, Kwa, Niger-Congo)

Akwé gegé d(o) así tòn.
 money much COP PSOR 3SG

‘He has much money.’ lit. ‘Much money is in.the.sphere.of him.’

(Rassinoux 2000: 32)

However, it is particularly common that the case markers or adpositions used to flag the possessor phrase in this kind of possessive clauses are also used in other constructions to express spatial meanings (in particular adessive, as in (7)), but benefactive, dative (8), comitative (9) or genitive (10) case markers or adpositions can also be recruited to flag the possessor in possessive clauses of the flagged-possessor type. In the glosses of these examples, glosses such as PSOR_{ADESS} in (7) must be understood as ‘adessive marker used to flag the possessor phrase in a possessive clause of the flagged-possessor type’.

(7) Russian (Slavic, Indo-European)

U Ivana byla sestra.
 PSOR_{ADESS} PRN.GEN COP.PST.sI:SG.F sister(F)

‘Ivan had a sister.’ lit. ‘At Ivan was a sister.’ interpreted as

‘In Ivan’s personal sphere was a sister.’

(8) Latvian (Baltic, Indo-European)

Viņam ir mašīna.
 3SG.M.PSOR_{DAT} COP.PRS.sI:3SG car

‘He has a car.’ lit. ‘To him is a car.’

(9) Welsh (Celtic, Indo-European)

Mae ci gyda fi.
 COP.PRS.sI:3SG dog PSOR_{COM} 1SG

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

(10) Northern Akhvakh (Nakh-Daghestanian)⁶

Di-be bik'iġa ači.
 1SG.PSOR_{GEN-N} COP.PST.NEG.N money(N)

‘I had no money.’ lit. ‘Of me was no money.’

⁶ The possessive clauses of the type illustrated in this example, if reduced to their essential terms, may be superficially similar to the type presented in §1.3.6.3. The difference is that, in the type presented in §1.3.6.3, the possessor and the possessee are obligatorily contiguous and can be analyzed as forming a constituent, which is not the case here.

1.3.6. The modified-possessee strategy

In the type of possessive clauses presented in this section, predicative possession is expressed as EXISTENCE OF A POSSESSED ENTITY. The possessee is encoded as the argument of an existential predicator (in the precise sense of monovalent predicator assigning to its argument the role of element of some not overtly specified situation), and the possessive interpretation of the clause follows from the fact that the argument of the existential predicator bears a possessive index, or is modified by an adnominal possessor. Three variants of this strategy can be distinguished

1.3.6.1. The “(Possessor) his-Possessee exists” subtype

In this variant of the modified-possessee strategy, the possessor, optionally coded as an unflagged NP, does not form a phrase with the possessee (in the sense that it is not necessarily adjacent to it), but it is cross-referenced by an obligatory possessive index attached to the possessee. The possessee, marked as such by the possessive index, constitutes the argument of an existential predicator, as in (11).

- (11) Vitu (Oceanic, Austronesian)
Matabunu, vazira vuluk-a vona.
 snake long.ago hair-adpI:3SG EXIST
 ‘Formerly snakes had fur.’ lit. ‘The snake, formerly its hair existed.’
 (van den Berg and Bachet 2006: 144)

Example (12) illustrates the same kind of construction in a language (Emérillon) in which positive existential clauses involve no overt predicator, and coincide in their form with NPs.

- (12) Emérillon (Maweti-Guarani, Tupian)
e-kija
 1SG-hammock
 ‘my hammock’ or ‘I have a hammock.’
 (Rose 2002: 325)

This subtype of the modified-possessee strategy is much more widespread in the world’s languages than the variants presented in 1.3.6.2 and 1.3.6.3.

1.3.6.2. The “(In.the.sphere.of Possessor) his-Possessee exists” subtype

In possessive clauses whose possessive nature follows from the presence of a possessive index attached to the possessee phrase, the possessor phrase may also show some kind of overt flagging, as in (13).

- (13) Hungarian (Ugric, Uralic)
Nek-em azonban van néhány kérdés-em.
 DAT-1SG however EXIST.PRS.sI:3SG a.couple.of question-adpI:1SG
 ‘However, I have a couple of questions.’

lit. ‘To me, however, there is a couple of questions of mine’.

The classification of such clauses as a subtype of the modified-possessee strategy (rather than a subtype of the flagged-possessor strategy) is motivated by the fact that in (13), the possessor phrase is optional (cf. *Van néhány kérdésem* ‘I have a couple of questions’), and consequently the flagging of the possessor, contrary to the possessive index attached to the possessee, does not play a crucial role in the recognition of the possessive nature of the clause.

In Turkish (14), contrary to Hungarian (where the morphological treatment of the possessor is different in the adnominal possessive construction and in predicative possession), the morphological characteristics of the possessor and the possessee are identical in both constructions. However, syntactically, it would not be correct to analyze the possessor in predicative possession as an adnominal possessor, since an adnominal possessor could not be separated from its head by the insertion of a locative adjunct, as in (14b).⁷

(14) Turkish (Turkic, Altaic)

a. *Murat-in arkadaşı*

Murat-GEN friend-adpI:3SG

‘Murat’s friend’ (noun phrase including an adnominal possessor)

b. *Murat-in İstanbul-da iki arkadaş var.*

Murat-GEN İstanbul-LOC two friend-adpI:3SG EXIST

‘Murat has two friends in İstanbul.’

(possessive clause, lit. ‘Of Murat in İstanbul two friends of his exist.’)

1.3.6.3. The “Possessor’s Possessee exists” subtype

In this variant of the modified-possessee strategy, the possessor is not cross-referenced on the possessee, but forms with it a phrase whose internal structure is that of the adnominal possession construction, as *se maafaufauga o te kau fai gaaluega* ‘an idea of the workers’ in (15).

(15) Tuvaluan (Oceanic, Austronesian)

Koo isi se maafaufauga o te kau fai gaaluega kee toe ffoki.

INC EXIST IDF idea GEN D group do work that again return

‘The workers had the idea that they’d return.’

lit. ‘An idea of the workers came into existence that they’d return.’

(Besnier 2000: 134)

1.3.7. The implicit possession strategy

In some languages, existential clauses to which a topic NP is adjoined, without anything that could be analyzed as coding the relationship between the topic and the argument of the existential predicator, are more or less regularly used as possessive clauses with the topic in

⁷ Ovsjannikova & Say (2014) show that, in the Turkic language Bashkir, the contrast between adnominal and predicative possession is less clear-cut than what has been proposed for Turkic. This, however, does not affect the clause-level status of the possessor phrase in predicative possession.

the role of possessor and the argument of the existential predicator in the role of possessee: “(As for) Possessor, Possessee exists”. For example, Japanese has possessive clauses of the flagged-possessor type, but also uses the implicit possession strategy, as in (16).

(16) Japanese (Japonic)

John san wa kuruma ga aru.
 PRN HON TOP car SBJ EXIST
 ‘John has a car.’ lit. ‘As for John, there is a car.’
 (Keidan 2008: 254-355)

Example (17) illustrates the same kind of construction in a language in which positive existential clauses involve no overt predicator, and coincide in their form with NPs. Such possessive clauses are potentially ambiguous with equative clauses, and their interpretation as possessive (rather than equative) clauses mainly relies on the lexical meaning of the juxtaposed NPs.

(17) Northern Tepehuan (Tepiman, Uto-Aztecan)

Gíika go-kíli.
 plow D-man
 ‘The man has a plow.’ lit. ‘A plow, the man.’
 (Bascom 1982: 283)

2. The flagged-possessor strategy in Mande languages

The flagged-possessor strategy, which constitutes one of the two most widespread strategies in the world’s languages, is in most Mande languages the only usual way of expressing plain-possessive predication. There is, however, variation in the precise nature of the postpositions used to flag the possessor phrase, and two or more postpositions may compete for the function of possessor flag.

2.1. Flagged-possessor constructions involving a postposition cognate with the noun ‘hand’

In many Mande languages, the postposition used to flag the possessor NP in this kind of possessive clauses is a postposition cognate with the noun ‘hand’ that specifically encodes reference to the personal sphere of a human individual and closely related notions such as responsibility. This possibility is illustrated in (18) with Bambara *bólo*.

(18) Bambara (Manding, Mande)

Wári té n bólo.
 money COP.NEG 1SG PSOR_{hand}
 ‘I have no money.’ lit. ‘No money is in my sphere.’

In almost all Manding languages, this is the commonest way of expressing predicative possession. Originally, the meaning of Bambara *X bólo* was presumably ‘in the hand of X’,

but synchronically, ‘in the hand of X’ is expressed as *X bólô lá*, with the noun *bólô* in the definite form and combined with a postposition. In *X bólô* ‘in the sphere of X’, *bólô* does not behave as a noun, and can only be analyzed as an adposition homonymous (and cognate) with a nominal lexeme, or as a transcategorial lexeme, depending on the theoretical framework.

Similarly, in the Bozo language Kelenga (19), as discussed by Heath (2023), *kìrìi* ‘in the sphere of’ is formally distinct from (although cognate with) the combination of the noun *kíri-i* ‘hand’ with a locative marker.

(19) Kelenga (Bozo, Mande)

Hòò há ñ gìrìi.
 house COP 1SG PSOR_{<hand}
 ‘I have a house.’
 Heath (2023: 365)

By contrast, in the Bozo languages Cliffs Jenaama (20) and Jenaama-Sorogaama (21), an expression decomposable as ‘in the hand of X’ has acquired the meaning ‘in the sphere of X’ without changing its form.

(20) Cliffs Jenaama (Bozo, Mande)

Kúngóló gā ñ sūgì-y.
 dog COP 1SG hand-LOC > PSOR
 ‘I have a dog.’
 Heath (2022a: 329)

(21) Jenaama-Sorogaama (Bozo, Mande)

Pánááⁿyè pánááⁿyè nàfòró-òní tùní tà júmú-yàⁿ
 in.the.old.days wealth-D.SG COP.PST IPFV.NEG person-D.SG
sw-í-y.
 hand-D.SG-LOC > PSOR
 ‘In the old times, the people didn’t use to have wealth.’
 Heath (2022b: 359)

In addition to Manding and Bozo languages, possessive clauses of this type with the possessor flagged either by a postposition cognate with the noun ‘hand’ or by an expression whose literal meaning is ‘in the hand of’ are also found in languages belonging to the Mokole, Jogo-Jeri, Soso-Jalonke, Southwestern Mande, South Mande and East Mande branches of the Mande family:

- Koranko cf. example (22), Kakabe (Vydrina 2015: 39)
- Jeri (Tröbbs 1998: 134)
- Jalonke (Lüpke 2005: 135)
- Vai (Welmers 1976: 76)
- Kpelle cf. example (23), Mende (Innes 1971: 65), Looma (Mischenko 2017: 381)
- Mano cf. example (24), Guro cf. example (25), Gban cf. example (25), Mwan (Perekhvalskaya 2017a: 760)
- San-Maka cf. example (27)

- (22) Koranko (Mokole, Mande)
Wódi yé n bólo.
 money COP 1SG PSOR_{<hand}
 ‘I have money.’
 (Kastenholz 1987: 112)
- (23) Kpelle (Southwestern Mande, Mande)
Yilê káá jéi.
 dog COP 1SG.hand.LOC
 ‘I have a dog.’
 (Konoshenko 2017: 311)
- (24) Mano (South Mande, Mande)
Gǎ́nǎ́éé vò ǒ j̄ kèlè.
 cat PL 3PL.COP 1SG PSOR_{<hand}
 ‘I have cats.’
 (Khachaturyan 2023: 90)
- (25) Guro (South Mande, Mande)
Kó dō à bī lē.
 house IDF COP man PSOR_{<hand}
 ‘The man has a house.’
 (Kuznetsova and Kuznetsova 2017: 852)
- (26) Gban (South Mande)
Sá " yěě ì kó.
 house 3SG COP 1SG PSOR_{<hand}
 ‘I have a house.’
 (Fedotov 2017: 984)

In San-Maka (Perekhval'skaya 2017b: 31), the construction with a postposition cognate with ‘hand’ (*gōŋ*) contrasts with the other possible ways of forming possessive clauses (cf. 2.5 and §3) in that it is typically used with reference to contingent possession of concrete possessors, cf. (27). This is consistent with the etymology of the construction.

- (27) San-Maka (East Mande, Mande)
Wóró tá mā lòŋ pīè, séné wóró bā mā gōŋ
 money COP 1SG PSOR at.home but money COP.NEG 1SG PSOR_{<hand}
kànáá wā.
 here NEG
 ‘I have money at home but I have no money on me here.’
 (Perekhval'skaya 2017b: 31)

Semantically, the evolution by which an adpositional phrase whose original meaning is ‘in the hand of X’ acquires the meaning ‘in the sphere of X’ is quite comparable to the acquisition of

the meaning ‘have’ by a verb whose original meaning is ‘hold’, a semantic shift attested for example in Spanish with the verb *tener* and in Portuguese with the verb *ter*, from Latin *tenere* ‘hold’.

2.2. Flagged-possessor constructions involving a postposition cognate with the noun ‘head’

In Bambara, the possessor phrase in flagged-possessor constructions can be flagged not only by *bólo*, cognate with the noun *bólo* ‘hand’, but also by *kùn*, cognate with the noun *kùn* ‘head’, adding to the meaning of possession a nuance of physical proximity or responsibility.

(28) Bambara (Manding, Mande)

- a. *Wári té n kùn.*
 money COP.NEG 1SG PSOR_{<head}
 ‘I have no money with me.’
- b. *Músó sàbà bé à kùn.*
 woman three COP 3SG PSOR_{<head}
 ‘He has three women (to support).’
 (Dumestre 2011: 588)

A similar contrast between *bólo* and *kùn* in the expression of predicative possession is mentioned in the descriptions of several other Manding languages (for example Kong Jula, cf. Sangaré 1984: 351, Bolon, cf. Zoungrana 1987: 153, etc.).

Outside Manding, the use of a postposition cognate with ‘head’ in possessive clauses is mentioned by Lüpke (2005: 135) for Jalonke, and by Vydrin (2017: 531, 532, 545) for Dan.

In Jalonke, the commonest way of expressing predicative possession is a flagged-possessor construction involving a benefactive postposition (see §2.4), but both *jii* (cognate with the noun ‘hand’) and *xun* (cognate with the noun ‘head’) can also be used to express “physical and temporary possession”, the use of *xun* being “limited to small objects like money, books, etc.”

2.3. Flagged-possessor constructions involving a locative postposition

In the languages of the word, it is particularly usual that the flagging of the possessor phrase in possessive clauses instantiating the flagged-possessor strategy involves adpositions or case markers that also have a locative function. The possessive use of adessive case markers or adpositions (i.e., case markers or adpositions also used to encode proximity in the spatial domain) is particularly common.

Interestingly, in Mande languages, flagged-possessor constructions involving postpositions whose other uses can be straightforwardly characterized as locative are uncommon. However, several Mande languages have flagged-possessor constructions involving multifunctional postpositions which have the expression of location as one of their possible uses, and are probably locative in origin. The case of the possessive use of the Manding postposition *lá* will be mentioned in §2.7. The possessive use of the Manding postposition *fê* is another case in point.

In Bambara, the postposition *fê* has a wide range of uses, but it is used in the spatial domain with a meaning of proximity, and also in possessive clauses in which it flags the possessor phrase, as in (29a). Interestingly, Bambara also has clauses with exactly the same structure in which *fê* does not express ‘in the vicinity of’ or ‘in the sphere of’, but ‘in the desire for’ (31b).

(29) Bambara (Manding, Mande)

- a. *Wári bé à fê.*
 money COP 3SG PSOR_{ADESS}
 ‘S/he has money.’ lit. ‘Money is in his/her sphere.’
- b. *Á bé wári fê.*
 3SG COP money in.the.desire.for
 ‘S/he likes/wants money.’ lit. ‘S/he is in the desire for money.’
 (Dumestre 2011: 307)

The same pattern is found in other Eastern Manding varieties, for example in Kong Jula with the postposition *fê* (Sangaré 1984: 347, 413), and in Zaba Marka with the postposition *bé* (Prost 1977: 47). It is also found in the Bozo languages Tigemaxo (Blecke (1996: 159) and Kelenga (cf. ex. (30)) with postpositions that also express proximity in the spatial domain and are presumably cognate with Manding *fê*.

(30) Kelenga (Soninke-Bozo, Mande)

- a. *Hòò há ñ fáà.*
 house COP 1SG PSOR_{ADESS}
 ‘I have a house.’ lit. ‘A house is in my sphere.’
- b. *Á há ’tùgù-ù fáà.*
 3SG COP meat-SG in.the.desire.for
 ‘S/he wants (would like) some meat.’ lit. ‘S/he is in the desire for meat.’
 (Heath 2023: 365, 360)

The same pattern is also found with postpositions that do not seem to be cognate with Manding *fê*:

- in Bobo with a postposition *tā*, cf. example (31),
- in Jalkunan (Jogo-Jeri) with a postposition *kà* (Heath 2017: 365, 253),
- in Dzùungoo (Samogo) with a postposition *rē*, cf. example (32),
- in Seenku (Samogo) with a postposition *te* (Prost 1971: 60, 149).

(31) Kiri Bobo (Bobo, Mande)

- a. *Fàngá tí yè tā gá.*
 strength COP 3PL PSOR_{ADESS} NEG
 ‘They have no strength.’ lit. ‘Strength is not in their sphere.’
- b. *Mā tī bē tá.*
 1SG COP 2SG in.the.desire.for
 ‘I love you.’ lit. ‘I am in the desire for you.’
 (Le Bris & Prost 1981: 56)

(32) Dzùùngoo (Samogo, Mande)

a. *Shú nī Músà rē.*

meat COP PRN PSOR_{ADESS}

‘Moussa has meat.’ lit. ‘Meat is in Moussa’s sphere.’

b. *Músà nī shú rē.*

PRN COP meat in.the.desire.for

‘Moussa wants some meat.’ lit. ‘Moussa is in the desire for meat.’

(Solomiac 2014: 260)

In sum, postpositional phrases with the same postposition acting as non-verbal predicates interpretable as expressing an adessive (‘in the vicinity of’), possessive (‘in the sphere of’) or volitional (‘in the desire for’) meaning can be viewed as an areal feature of the North-Central part of the Mande area.

2.4. Flagged-possessor constructions involving a benefactive or dative postposition

By ‘dative postposition’, I mean a postposition used to flag the recipients of verbs of giving and for which this use cannot be analyzed (at least synchronically) as an extension of a more concrete spatial meaning. Similarly, by ‘benefactive postposition’, I mean a postposition used to flag benefactive adjuncts and for which this use cannot be analyzed (at least synchronically) as an extension of a more concrete spatial meaning.

In Soso (33) and Jalonke (34), flagged-possessor constructions involving a benefactive postposition are the usual way of expressing predicative possession. Note that the form of this postposition suggests that it might be etymologically cognate with the Manding postposition *fê* mentioned in §2.3.

(33) Soso (Soso-Jalonke, Mande)

Bànxii yí xáméé bē.

house DEM man PSOR_{BEN}

‘This man has a house.’ lit. ‘A house (is) for this man.’

(Touré 1994: 134)

(34) Jalonke (Soso-Jalonke, Mande)

Xii-de m’ aa bē.

sleep-place NEG 3SG PSOR_{BEN}

‘He had no place to sleep.’ lit. ‘A place to sleep (was) not for him.’

(Lüpke 2005: 309)

In addition to possessive clauses in which, as already mentioned above, the possessor phrase is flagged by an expression decomposable as ‘in the hand of’, the Bozo language Cliffs Jenaama also has possessive clauses of the flagged-possessor type in which the possessor phrase is flagged by a postposition which, according to the definitions posited above, can be characterized as a dative/benefactive postposition.

- (35) Cliffs Jenaama (Bozo, Mande)
Kúŋgóló gā ñ tē.
 dog COP 1SG PSOR_{DAT/BEN}
 ‘I have a dog.’, lit. ‘A dog is to/for me.’
 Heath (2022a: 329)

Note that, etymologically, this dative-benefactive postposition might well be cognate with some of the adessive postpositions mentioned in §2.3.

2.5. Flagged-possessor constructions involving a comitative postposition

This variant of the flagged-possessor type is found in the Bozo language Jenaama-Sorogaama, cf. ex. (36).

- (36) Jenaama-Sorogaama (Bozo, Mande)
Nàmàà gá ì pá
 house COP 1SG PSOR_{COM}
 ‘I have a house.’ lit. ‘A house is with me.’
 Heath (2022b: 358)

Here again, the form of this postposition suggests that it might be etymologically cognate with some of the adessive postpositions mentioned in §2.3 (Kelenga *fáà*, Manding *fè*) and with the Soso-Jalonke benefactive postpositions mentioned in §2.4.

2.6. Flagged-possessor constructions involving a dedicated postposition with no obvious etymology within the same language

In Soninke (37), the postposition *màxá* that flags the possessor phrase in possessive clauses instantiating the flagged-possessor strategy is only found in uses in which it can be glossed as ‘in the sphere of’, and it does not seem to be cognate with any Soninke lexeme.

- (37) Soninke (Soninke-Bozo, Mande)
Mákkántèn ñ(á) ín màxá.
 maize.field.D COP 1SG PSOR
 ‘I have a maize field.’ lit. ‘A maize field is in my sphere.’

However, this postposition is probably cognate with postpositions having the form *ma* found with other meanings in Mande languages belonging to all the basic units that constitute the Mande family.⁸ The postpositions in question carry meanings that are often analyzed as deriving from the spatial notion of contact, see in particular Vydrin (2019 chapter 11 §11.2) for Bambara *mà*. The notion of contact is also evoked by Dumestre (2011: 653) to explain the

⁸ The hypothesis that the Soninke postposition *màxá* is cognate with postpositions having the form *ma* in other Mande languages is supported by the fact that Soninke also has a frozen prefix *màxàn-* corresponding to the Bambara prefix *mà-*, as in *màxàn-cěfě* ‘slander’ < *sěfě* ‘speak’ (Bambara *mà-kúmá*), *màxàn-kátú* ‘strike hard’ < *kátú* ‘strike’ (Bambara *mă-gòsí*), *màxàn-ñètú* ‘adorn’ < *yètú* ‘tie’ (Bambara *mă-sìrì*), *màxàn-pógú* ‘fill’ < *fógú* ‘be full’ (Bambara *mà-fá*), etc.

meaning of a Bambara noun *mà* probably cognate with the postposition *mà*, which has a very limited syntactic distribution and has no obvious translation equivalent in French or other European languages.⁹ Interestingly, a noun *mãa* ‘body’ is attested in Sangala Jalonke (author’s fieldnotes), and an etymological relationship is also possible with a Manding verb meaning ‘touch’ (Bambara *màga*, also found as *maxa* in the Maninka varieties of Western Mali and Eastern Senegal).

A dedicated postposition with no obvious etymology (*lòṅ*) is also found in the possessive clauses of San-Maka instantiating the flagged-possessor strategy (Perekhvalskaya 2017b), cf. example (38). I am aware of no possible cognate of this postposition in other Mande languages.

- (38) San-Maka (East Mande, Mande)
Wùrù tá Bòyó(ṅ) lòṅ.
 field COP PRN PSOR
 ‘Boyo has a field.’
 (Perekhvalskaya 2017b: 30)

2.7. Competition between two or more postpositions in flagged-possessor constructions

When two or more postpositions are in competition in possessive clauses instantiating the flagged-possessor strategy, the choice may reflect semantic distinctions in the possessive relationship.

For example, in Mandinka, two postpositions can be found in possessive clauses instantiating the flagged-possessor strategy:¹⁰ *bùlù* and *lá*. The postposition *bùlù* is cognate with the noun ‘hand’ and is also used in verbal predication with the meaning ‘in the sphere of’ or ‘under the responsibility of’, whereas *lá* is a multifunctional postposition that was probably locative in origin and is probably cognate with the noun *dáa* ‘mouth, opening, edge’, cf. Grégoire (1984). Synchronically, *lá* is productively used in Mandinka to express instrument, cause, involvement in a situation or activity and temporal location, but not spatial location, typically expressed in Mandinka by means of the postposition *tó*. In possessive clauses, as illustrated by examples (39) and (40), possessive relationships involving a concrete non-human possessee physically distinct from the possessor (whatever their precise nature) can only be encoded by means of *bùlù*, part-whole relationships can only be encoded by means of *lá*, whereas both *bùlù* and *lá* can be found in possessive clauses referring to interpersonal relationships or abstract possession.

- (39) Mandinka (Manding, Mande)
 a. *Kódì té ǰ bùlù.*
 money COP.NEG 1SG PSOR_{hand}
 ‘I have no money.’ lit. ‘No money is in my sphere.’

⁹ This noun occurs exclusively as the subject of a limited set of predicates, as for example *à mà ká dí* ‘s/he is friendly’ lit. ‘his/her *ma* is pleasant’. It exists only in the indefinite form, is obligatorily modified by an adnominal possessor, and is incompatible with any other kind of modifier.

¹⁰ Mandinka also has a transitive ‘have’ verb, cf. §4.

- b. *Í ñôŋ dindíŋò bé ñ búlù.*
 2SG like child.D COP 1SG PSOR_{<hand}
 ‘I have a child like you.’
- c. *Bòlòo bé í búlù.*
 correctness.D COP 2SG PSOR_{<hand}
 ‘You are right.’ lit. ‘Correctness is in your sphere.’
- d. *Màkáamà té à búlù.*
 prestige COP.NEG 3SG PSOR_{<hand}
 ‘S/he has no prestige.’
- e. *Làtêe bé ñ búlù.*
 mourning.D COP 1PL PSOR_{<hand}
 ‘We are mourning.’ lit. ‘A mourning is in our sphere.’
- f. *Bàlàndánfòò bé ñ búlú sǎamà.*
 football.match.D COP 1PL PSOR_{<hand} tomorrow
 ‘We have a football match tomorrow.’

(40) Mandinka (Manding, Mande)

- a. *Bínà té ññ ninsôo lá.*
 horn COP.NEG DEM cow.D PSOR
 ‘This cow has no horns.’
- b. *Báadiŋ té à lá.*
 relative COP.NEG 3SG PSOR
 ‘S/he has no relatives.’
- c. *Ñóŋ té à lá.*
 equal COP.NEG 3SG PSOR
 ‘S/he has no equal.’
- d. *Sòŋôo bé fòolèesúwòo lá.*
 defect.D COP bicycle.D PSOR
 ‘The bicycle has a defect.’
- e. *Kónkòo bé dindíŋò lá.*
 hunger.D COP child.D PSOR
 ‘The child is hungry.’ lit. ‘Hunger is in the child’s sphere.’
- f. *Fàlá té í là.*
 luck COP.NEG 2SG PSOR
 ‘You have no luck.’

The situation of Bambara is more complex, with four postpositions available to flag the possessor phrase in possessive clauses instantiating the flagged-possessor strategy: *bólo*, *lá*, *fê* and *kùn*. For a description of their distribution, readers are referred to Vydrin (2019 chapter 7 §7.4).

Some others cases have been briefly mentioned above, but in this article, this aspect of predicative possession is not dealt with systematically, the main reason being that the relevant information is available for only a minority of the languages whose possessive constructions are mentioned.

3. The modified-possessee strategy in Mande languages

Of the three variants of this strategy that have been defined in §1.3.6, the variants in which the possessor phrase and the possessee phrase do not form a constituent, but a possessive index is attached to the possessee phrase (“(Possessor) his/her-Possessee exists” and “(In.the.sphere.of Possessor) his/her-Possessee exists”), are by far the commonest ones in the world’s languages. However, they are not attested in Mande languages, and this is not surprising, since possessive inflection of nouns is not attested in the Mande language family.

As demonstrated by Fedotov (2016), who analyses in detail the constituent structure of the possessive clauses of Gban, this language has possessive clauses instantiating the variant of the modified-possessee strategy in which the possessor phrase and the possessee phrase form a constituent whose internal structure is identical to the adnominal possession construction (“Possessor’s Possessee exists”).

As illustrated in (41), in Gban, the modified-possessee construction (41b) coexists with an oblique-possessor construction involving a postposition cognate with the noun ‘hand’ (41a), and these two constructions are sometimes interchangeable. Note that (41b) is an existential construction in which the adverb ‘there’ is not understood as referring to any specific place, forming thus an existential predicator in combination with the copula.

(41) Gban (South Mande)

- a. *Sá* *ʷ* *yěě* *ĩ* *kɔ̃*.
house 3SG COP 1SG PSOR_{hand}
‘I have a house’ lit. ‘A house is in my sphere.’
- b. *Ĩ* (*mɔ̃*) *sá* *ʷ* *yěě* *yě*.
1SG GEN house 3SG COP there_{EXPL}
‘I have a house.’ lit. ‘A house of mine exists.’
(Fedotov 2016: 321, 322)

However, as analyzed in detail by Fedotov (2016), in positive possessive clauses with indefinite possesseees, the expression of legal ownership is the only semantic type of possession for which both constructions can be used freely. The flagged-possessor construction is the only possible construction for temporary possession, and is predominant in the expression of abstract possession, whereas the modified-possessee construction is the only possible construction for part-whole relationships (including bodyparts) and social relations, and also for kinship, except if the possessee is ‘child (son or daughter)’. By contrast, no difference in the distribution of the two constructions was observed by Fedotov (2016) in negative possessive clauses, or in possessive clauses with definite possesseees.

In addition to Gban, possessive clauses that can be rendered literally as “Possessor’s Possessee exists” are attested, alongside with other possible strategies (mainly the flagged-possessor strategy with the possessor flagged by a postposition cognate with the noun ‘hand’), in several other South and East Mande languages.

- Mano cf. example (42),
- Dan cf. example (43),
- Guro cf. example (44),

- Mwan (Perekhval'skaya 2017a: 739),
- Wan (Tatiana Nikitina, personal communication),
- San-Maka cf. example (45),
- Bisa (Prost 1950: 46).

(42) Mano (South Mande, Mande)

G̃ sòḡmì lē bē.

man girlfriend COP existing

‘The man has a girlfriend.’ lit. ‘A girlfriend of the man exists.’

(Khachatryan & al. 2022: 201)

(43) Dan (South Mande, Mande)

Dūbēḡdū bā víḡḡ yḡ dḡ.

sorcerer.PL GEN plane 3SG be

‘The sorcerers have a plane.’ lit. ‘A plane of the sorcerers exists.’

(Vydrin 2017: 546)

Example (44) illustrates the possible equivalence between a modified-possessee construction (44b) and an oblique-possessor construction involving a postposition cognate with the noun ‘hand’ (44a) in Guro. Note that *à* acts as a copula in (44a), but as an existential predicator in (44b).

(44) Guro (South Mande, Mande)

a. *Kḡ dḡ à bī lēè.*

house IDF COP man PSOR_{hand}

‘The man has a house.’ lit. ‘A house is in the man’s sphere.’

b. *Bī lē kḡ dḡ à.*

man GEN house IDF EXIST

‘The man has a house.’ lit. ‘A house of the man exists.’

(Kuznetsova and Kuznetsova 2017: 852, 851)

In San-Maka, as already mentioned in §2.7, Perekhval'skaya (2017b) shows that the possible constructions of possessive clauses are not equivalent semantically. (45) illustrates the modified-possessee construction.

(45) San-Maka (East Mande, Mande)

Bòyó(ḡ) ā wùrù bāḡbāḡ.

PRN GEN field EXIST.NEG

‘Boyo has no field.’ lit. ‘A field of Boyo does not exist.’

(Perekhval'skaya 2017b: 30)

In the case of Bisa it is interesting to observe that the modified-possessee strategy is mentioned (in competition with a ‘have’ verb) in Eddyshaw’s (2025) description of Kusaal, a Gur language in contact with Bisa, cf. (46).

- (46) Kusaal (Oti-Volta, Gur, Niger-Congo)
M̃ bʊʊg bé.
 1SG goat EXIST
 ‘I have a goat.’ lit. ‘A goat of mine exists.’
 (Eddyshaw 2025: 9)

4. The bivalent possessive verb strategy in Mande languages

The bivalent possessive verb strategy is one of the two most widespread strategies in the world’s languages. ‘Have’ verbs are common in all the language families that surround the Mande area (Atlantic, Mel, Kru, Kwa, Gur, Songhay and Dogon), and the use of ‘have’ verbs is particularly prevalent in the Atlantic family. By contrast, the bivalent possessive verb strategy is only attested in a very small minority of Mande languages. In all cases, the bivalent possessive verb is a transitive ‘have’ verb whose subject expresses the role of possessor, as illustrated in (47b), to be compared with the prototypical transitive clause (47a).

- (47) Mandinka (Manding, Mande)
- a. *Fàatú yè kìn-òò tábí kèè-lú yè.*
 Fatou CPL.TR meal-D cook man.D-PL for
 ‘Fatou cooked the meal for the men.’
- b. *Fàatú yè báadíŋ-ò-lú sòtó ñĩŋ sàatêe tó.*
 Fatou CPL.TR relative-D-PL have DEM village.D LOC
 ‘Fatou has relatives in this village.’

In Mandinka, this type of possessive clauses is in competition with a construction of the flagged-possessor type in which the possessor phrase is flagged by a postposition cognate with the noun ‘hand’ or by the multifunctional postposition *lá* (see §2.7). Both types are equally common in discourse, and are most of the time freely interchangeable, as can be seen by comparing the uses of the *sòtó*-construction illustrated in (48) with the examples of the flagged-possessor construction provided in (18) and (19) above.

- (48) Mandinka (Manding, Mande)
- a. *Ñĩŋ ñinsóo m̃aŋ bínóo sòtó.*
 DEM cow.D CPL.NEG horn.D have
 ‘This cow has no horns.’
- b. *Ñĩŋ d̃aa m̃aŋ sòròndáŋó sòtó.*
 DEM door.D CPL.NEG lock.D have
 ‘This door has no lock.’
- c. *Fàatú yè díŋ sàbá sòtó.*
 NPR CPL.TR child three have
 ‘Fatou has three children.’
- d. *Músáa yè dáajiká-bétóo sòtó.*
 NPR CPL.TR character-good.D have
 ‘Moussa has a good character.’

- e. *Díndínò yè sánjí sàbá sòtó.*
 child.D CPL.TR child three have
 ‘The child is three years old.’ lit. ‘The child has three years.’
- f. *Í mán kèlèñóo sòtó.*
 1SG CPL.NEG enemy have
 ‘I have no enemy.’
- g. *Í ñá kòlèyáa sòtó.*
 1SG CPL.TR problem.D have
 ‘I have a problem.’
- h. *Í màn kúmá sòtó.*
 1SG CPL.NEG word have
 ‘I have nothing to say.’
- i. *Í ñà síkóo sòtó.*
 1SG CPL.TR doubt.D have
 ‘I have doubts.’
- j. *Ñíj mánsáalòo yè kótó fùlá sòtó.*
 DEM riddle.D CPL.TR meaning two have
 ‘This riddle has two solutions.’
- k. *Ñíj kùuráñò mán jàarálóo sòtó.*
 DEM riddle.D CPL.NEG treatment.D have
 ‘This disease has no treatment.’
- l. *Í ná kàfóo yè bèñóo sòtó bī.*
 1PL GEN association.D CPL.TR meeting.D have today
 ‘Our association has a meeting today.’

The fact that Mandinka is the only Manding language with a transitive ‘have’ verb available to express a variety of relations comparable to that expressed by European ‘have’ verbs is probably the consequence of long-standing contact with Atlantic languages, since such ‘have’ verbs are pervasive in Atlantic languages.¹¹ The cognates of the Mandinka verb *sòtó* ‘have’ in the other Manding languages (Bambara *sòrɔ*, etc.) express the dynamic meaning of acquisition, but not the stative meaning of possession, and it is plausible that contact with Atlantic languages favored the evolution by which a ‘get’ verb acquires possessive uses.¹²

The other Mande languages in which ‘have’ verbs are attested are the East Mande languages Bisa and Boko-Busa. They share with Mandinka a geographically peripheral position in which they are surrounded by non-Mande languages (mainly Gur languages in the case of Bisa and Boko-Busa). As in the case of Mandinka, substrate or adstrate influence can be suspected, since in the Gur language family, ‘have’ verbs are common. In particular, a transitive ‘have’ verb (*mɔ*) exists in Baatonum/Bariba, a Gur language in contact with Boko-Busa, and in three Gur languages in contact with Bisa: Kasem (*jɛgɛ*), Kusaal (*mɔr*) and Moore (*tare*).

¹¹ To the best of my knowledge, ‘have’ verbs are found in all the Atlantic languages that have been documented so far, with the only exception being some Balanta varieties in which a construction instantiating the flagged-possessee strategy constitutes the usual way of expressing predicative possession.

¹² This evolution is widely attested in the world’s languages, in particular in Creole languages, cf. Michaelis et al. (2013).

Example (49) illustrates the ‘have’ verb of Boko.

- (49) Boko (East Mande, Mande)
- a. *Á né vĩ m̀̀plä.*
3SG child have two
‘S/he has two children.’
 - b. *Á kō vĩ.*
3SG hen have
‘S/he has hens.’
 - c. *Á k̀̀sú vĩ.*
3SG leprosy have
‘S/he has leprosy.’
 - d. *Má wí vĩ.*
1SG shame have
‘I feel ashamed.’ lit. ‘I have shame.’
(Prost 1976: 190)

As regards Bisa, two transitive verbs expressing ‘have’ are mentioned in Vanhoudt’s (1999) dictionary: *kú* and *yí*. Interestingly, *kú* also means ‘catch’, whereas *yí* also means ‘see’. It is well-known that transitive ‘have’ verbs often result from a semantic shift affecting transitive verbs expressing meanings variously related to possession, such as ‘take’, ‘grasp’ ‘hold’, ‘get’, ‘bear’. The semantic link between ‘see’ and possession is not immediately obvious, but the co-lexification of ‘see’ and ‘find’ is cross-linguistically common, and a semantic shift from ‘find’ to ‘get’, and further to ‘have’, is easily conceivable. In West Africa, the use of a ‘see’ verb as a ‘have’ verb is attested in the Kwa language Ewe (Heine 1997: 43).

5. The flagged-possessee strategy in Mande languages

This strategy is mentioned as a productive way of forming typical possessive clauses (i.e., possessive clauses that refer to concrete possesseees and do not imply physical proximity between the possessor and the possessee) in the descriptions of only two Mande language: the East Mande language Bisa, cf. example (50), and Bobo, cf. example (51). As is general in possessive clauses instantiating the flagged-possessee strategy, the adposition that flags the possessee phrase is an adposition also used in comitative function.

- (50) Bisa (East Mande, Mande)
- Mɔ kyisɔ: bɪ ta ɲi rɔ ŋ gɔta.*
1SG neighbor D COP child PL PSEE_{COM} many
‘My neighbor has many children.’ lit. ‘My neighbor is with many children.’
(Vanhoudt 1992: 332)

(51) Kiri Bobo (Bobo, Mande)

Á tī kō gbàñā.

3SG COP PSEE_{COM} money

‘He has money.’ lit. ‘He is with money.’

(Le Bris & Prost 1981: 56)

Clauses of this type can also be found in some other Mande languages, with, however, a limited range of possible uses that excludes prototypical possession. For example, in Mandinka, the construction *X nīh Y lè mú*, literally ‘It is X with Y’ can be used to express states affecting individuals or characteristic features of individuals, as in (52), but is not available to express typical possessive relationships involving concrete possessors, in particular the relationships between a person and the objects s/he has at his/her disposal.

(52) Mandinka (Manding, Mande)

Ĭ nīh kòlèyāa lè mú.

1SG with problem.D FOC COP

‘I have problems.’ Lit. ‘It’s me with problems.’

Jalkunan can also be mentioned here. According to Heath (2017: 257), Jalkunan has a comitative-instrumental postposition *dè* also used in possessive clauses of the flagged-possessee type, but this construction is only used “to describe attributes, whether temporarily possessed or inherent”. For example, ‘The sheep has a rope on it’ can be expressed literally as ‘The sheep is with a rope’, and ‘The sheep has horns’ can be expressed literally as ‘The sheep is with horns’, but typical possessive relationships such as ‘I have money in the bank’ or ‘I have relatives in that village’ cannot be expressed by means of the flagged-possessee strategy.

The use of the flagged-possessee strategy as a relatively productive way of expressing predicative possession in Bobo and Bisa is probably the result of long-standing contact with Gur languages, since in the Gur language family, constructions of this type, as well as ‘have’ verbs resulting from the univerbation and reanalysis of sequences ‘be with’, are not uncommon. For example, in the Senufo language Supyire, the flagged-possessee strategy is a common way of expressing predicative possession (in competition, however, with the flagged-possessor strategy, cf. Carlson 1994: 248-9), and a verb *wena* ‘have’ decomposable etymologically as *wè* ‘be’ + *na* ‘with’ can be found in the Gurunsi languages Tem and Kabiye.

5. Summary

Among the strategies defined in section 1.3, the Mande language family is characterized by a very strong prevalence of the flagged-possessor strategy. The modified-possessee strategy is pervasive in South Mande and is also found in East Mande, but is not attested in the other branches of the Mande family. The bivalent possessive verb strategy is found only in geographically peripheral Mande languages surrounded by non-Mande languages (either Atlantic or Gur). Within the limits of the available documentation, the flagged-possessee strategy has been mentioned as productive in two languages only. The other possible

strategies (the proprietive derivation strategy and the implicit possession strategy) are not attested at all in the available documentation on Mande languages.

6. Inverse-possessive predication in Mande languages

As illustrated in examples (53) and (54), in almost all the Mande languages for which the relevant data are available, inverse-possessive predication is formally an instance of equative (nominal) predication in which the predicate phrase is an adnominal possessive construction. The head of the predicate phrase may be a noun repeating the head of the argument phrase ('This house is the chief's house'), a noun which means 'thing' ('This house is the chief's thing'), or a pronoun glossable as 'that of' ('This house is that of the chief').

- (53) Boko (East Mande, Mande)
Sã bëë kí pɔ̀-ì
 sheep DEM chief thing-COP
 'This sheep is the chief's.' lit. 'This sheep is the chief's thing.'
 (Prost 1976: 184)

- (54) Mandinka (Manding, Mande)
Ñĩŋ bàŋkôo mú ñtèlú lè tâa tí.
 DEM land.D COP 1PL FOC that.of as
 'This land is ours.' lit. 'This land is that of us.'

However, Gban has a different type of construction, in which the possessor is flagged by a benefactive postposition, as in (55).

- (55) Gban (South Mande)
Kɛ̃ nɛ̃ yɛ̃ ì mɔ̃.
 hoe DEM COP 1SG for
 'This hoe is mine.' lit. 'This hoe is for me.'
 (Fedotov 2017: 98985)

This construction, which can be glossed literally as 'Possessee is for Possessor' is formally similar to those mentioned in §2.4 above, but functionally different, since the constructions exemplified in §2.4 express the perspectivization "from possessor to possessee" (and are typically used with indefinite possesseees), whereas in Gban, clauses such as (53) express the perspectivization "from possessee to possessor" (and involve definite possesseees).

Interestingly, in Gban, plain-possessive predication (as in example (41a), reproduced below as (56)) and inverse-possessive predication (as in example (55)) can be equally expressed by means of a non-verbal predicative construction in which the predicate phrase is a postpositional phrase denoting the possessor, but with two distinct postpositions: a benefactive postposition for inverse-possessive predication (55), and a postposition cognate with the noun 'hand' for plain-possessive predication (56).

(56) Gban (South Mande)

Sá " *yěě* *ĩ* *kǎ*.
house 3SG COP 1SG PSOR_{hand}

‘I have a house.’ lit. ‘A house is in my sphere.’

(Fedotov 2017: 984)

7. Conclusion

The main conclusions that emerge from this survey of predicative possession in Mande languages are as follows:

- In the possessive clauses of Mande languages, by far the most widespread strategy is the flagged-possessor strategy.
- In the possessive clauses of Mande languages instantiating the flagged-possessor strategy, possessor flagging by means of postpositions cognate with the noun ‘hand’ or expressions decomposable as ‘in the hand of’ is predominant.
- In the languages spoken in the North-Central part of the Mande area, the same postposition is often used to flag the possessor phrase in possessive clauses and to flag the object of desire in formally similar clauses expressing volition, which constitutes a typologically rare co-expression pattern.
- Possessive clauses instantiating the “Possessor’s Possessee exists” variant of the modified-possessee strategy, which are quite rare in the world’s languages, are pervasive in the South Mande branch of the Mande family, and are also found in East Mande.
- The bivalent possessive verb strategy (“Possessor has Possessee”) and the flagged-possessee strategy (“Possessor is with Possessee”), relatively common elsewhere in West Africa, are marginal in the Mande language family, and their occurrence in some Mande languages as a productive way of expressing predicative possession is probably due to contact with non-Mande languages.

It has long been observed the Mande language family shows a relatively homogeneous typological profile that contrasts in many respects with that of the other language families of West Africa. As regards predicative possession, unfortunately, detailed surveys comparable to that presented in this article for the Mande language family are not available for the neighboring language families. However, as already mentioned above, examples of languages having transitive ‘have’ verbs are easy to find in all the other language families of West Africa, the predominance of *have*-constructions being particularly obvious in the Atlantic family. Conversely, examples of languages using the flagged-possessor strategy, strongly predominant in Mande, are much less easy to find. In particular, to the best of my knowledge, no description of an Atlantic language mentions the flagged-possessor strategy as a common way of forming possessive clauses. It is significant that, in the worldwide language sample analyzed by Stassen (2009), nine of the ten Atlantic, Mel, Kru and Gur languages included in the sample are tagged as using *have*-constructions, and only one (the Senufo language Supyire) is tagged as using the flagged-possessor strategy. Consequently, it can safely be concluded that predicative possession is one of the domains in which the typological profile

of the Mande language family contrasts with that of the other language families of West Africa.

Abbreviations

ADESS = adessive,
adpI = index cross-referencing an adnominal possessor
BEN = benefactive
COM = comitative
COP = copula
CPL = completive
D = definite determiner, or default determiner
DAT = dative
DEM = demonstrative
EMPH = emphatic
EXIST = existential predicator
EXPL = expletive
F = feminine
FOC = focus
GEN = genitive
HON = honorific
IDF = indefinite
INC = inchoative
IND = indicative
ioI = index cross-referencing an indirect object
IPFV = imperfective
LOC = locative
M = masculine
N = noun, or neuter
NEG = negative
NOM = nominative
NP = noun phrase
PL = plural
PRF = perfect
PRN = proper name
PROPR = proprietive
PRS = present
PSEE = possessee
PSOR = possessor
PST = past
SBJ = subject marker
SG = singular
sI = subject index
TOP = topic
TR = transitive

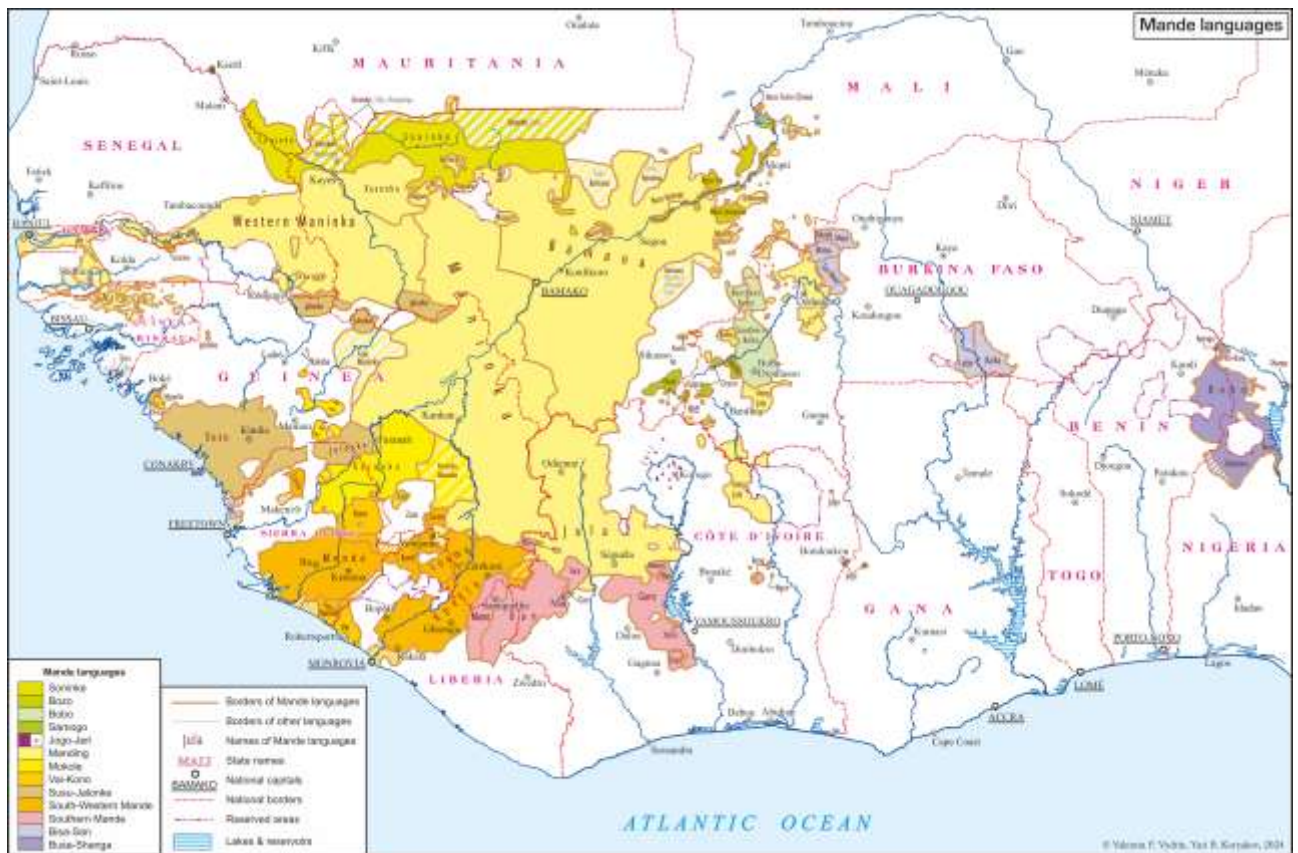
V = verb

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Mande languages. English version of the map from (Vydrin & Koryakov 2017)