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## **Control and the evolution of possessive and existential constructions**

**Denis Creissels**

University of Lyon

denis.creissels @univ-lyon2.fr

<http://deniscreissels.fr>

### **Abstract**

This paper examines aspects of the evolution of possessive and existential construction that shed interesting light on the affinities between possession and the notions underlying existential predication, comitative predication and transitive predication. The unity of the notion of possession follows from the notion of personal sphere of an individual, but the relationships between an individual and the elements of his/her personal sphere are very diverse, and sometimes ambiguous, with respect to the control exerted by the possessor. Consequently, whatever the source of a predicative construction expressing possession (existential, comitative, or transitive), its extension to the whole domain of possession implies extension to situations that differ from those encoded by the source construction in terms of control, which favors further evolutions. This explains why many languages have constructions expressing predicative possession that are fully aligned with none of the constructions that can be their historical source.

**Keywords:** possession, existence, comitative, transitivity

### **1. Introduction**

Cross-linguistically, existential constructions (*At Possessor is Possessee*), comitative constructions (*Possessor is with Possessee*) and transitive predications originally involving verbs like ‘get’, ‘hold’ or ‘grasp’ (*Possessor gets/holds/grasps Possessee*) constitute three major sources of predicative constructions expressing possession (see among many others Creissels 1979, Heine 1997). In their turn, possessive predications in which the possessor and the possessee are encoded like the agent and the patient of prototypical transitive verbs are a possible source of existential constructions (French *il y a*, Greek *έχει*, Wolof *am na*, etc.). In this paper, I discuss aspects of these evolutions that shed interesting light on the affinities between possession and the notions underlying existential predication, comitative predication and transitive predication.

The paper is organized as follows. Sections 2 to 5 present four case studies: Section 2 deals with the behavior of the Spanish verb of possession *tener*, which supports the current view according to which such verbs are characterized by a low degree of semantic transitivity. Section 3, devoted to the existential use of the Serbo-Croat verb of possession *imati*, shows that an existential predication originating from a possessive construction may acquire formal features that differentiate it from the source construction. Section 4, devoted to the possessive construction of Finnish, shows that the tendency to acquire formal features that differentiate possessive predication from existential predication can also be observed in possessive predications originating from an existential construction. Section 5 deals with the possessive

construction of Tswana, which provides additional evidence that, conceptually, possessive predications have a somewhat ambiguous status with respect to transitivity. Section 6 discusses the possible motivations of the evolutions described in the previous sections in the light of the theory according to which the control exerted by one of the participants is an essential element of the situations typically encoded by transitive predications. The conclusion is that the heterogeneity of possessive relationships in terms of controllability by one of the participants provides a possible explanation of the apparently contradictory evolutions involving possessive predications.

## 2. Transitive verbs of possession and differential object marking: the case of Spanish

Differential object marking is a widespread phenomenon in the languages of the world, and many studies have been devoted to its conditioning,<sup>1</sup> which may involve the following types of features:

- semantic/pragmatic properties of the object argument (animacy, definiteness, specificity, topicality, givenness, ...),
- formal properties of the noun phrase in object function,
- grammatical features of the predicate (aspect, tense, mood),
- semantic types of verbal lexemes.

Most studies on differential object marking have concentrated on animacy and definiteness/specificity, whose relevance is particularly obvious, whereas conditioning by the verb type has been largely neglected. However, some authors at least have pointed out that differential object marking and its diachronic development may crucially depend on the semantic type of the verbal lexeme: in differential object marking systems, all other things being equal, objects of higher-transitivity verbs are more likely to be marked (and diachronically, are marked earlier) than objects of lower-transitivity verbs (see in particular Hopper & Thompson 1980: 259, 272, von Heusinger & Kaiser 2007b: 95-6, von Heusinger, Klein & Niyazmetowa 2008).

Since it is widely assumed that *have* and its equivalents in other languages are located at/near the bottom of the transitivity scale (see among others Tsunoda 1985: 388), in languages that have both a transitive verb of possession and a differential object marking system, the object of 'have' can be expected to be left unmarked in conditions in which the object of typical transitive verbs is marked, and this prediction is borne out by Spanish.

Spanish is known for its complex differential object marking system involving the preposition *a*. As observed by von Heusinger & Kaiser 2007b: 96, in Spanish, 'purely existential verbs such as *tener* 'have' have a very strong tendency, even today, not to take objects that are *a*-marked'. I have not been able to find detailed studies dealing specifically with the use of *a* with the object of *tener* 'have', but the fact that the rules accounting for the marking of the object of *tener* are at least partly different from those accounting for the behavior of other verbs is widely acknowledged by reference grammars of Spanish and handbooks of Spanish, and it is symptomatic that the use of *a* with the verb *tener* is a recurrent topic in Internet forums devoted to questions of Spanish grammar.

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent survey of this question, see von Heusinger, Klein & de Swart 2008.

*Tener* ‘have’ has in common with more typical transitive verbs the fact that its object must be marked with *a* at least in certain conditions. For example, in constructions involving a secondary predicate, one may observe contrasts such as that illustrated by Ex. (1), in which the differential object marking parallels the choice between *ser* and *estar* in synonymous copulative constructions with adjectives referring to permanent or temporary states in predicate function).

(1) Spanish – *Diccionario panhispánico de dudas* (Madrid: Santillana, 2005, p. 3)

a. *Tiene un hijo invidente.* (= *Un hijo suyo es invidente.*)

have:PRS:3SG INDEF:M:SG son:M:SG blind:M:SG  
‘His/her son is blind.’

b. *Tiene a un hijo enfermo.* (= *Un hijo suyo está enfermo.*)

have:PRS:3SG ACC INDEF:M:SG son:M:SG sick:M:SG  
‘His/her son is (temporarily) sick.’

However, in conditions in which the general rule is that objects are marked by the preposition *a*, the preposition is sometimes excluded with *tener* ‘have’, as illustrated by Ex. (2).

(2) Spanish

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.’

Ex. (2a) shows that, with verbs that are not prototypical action verbs but nevertheless are located higher than *tener* on the scale of transitivity, such as *conocer* ‘know’,<sup>2</sup> *a* is normally required with indefinite but referential object NPs referring to persons,<sup>3</sup> and Ex. (2b) shows that this rule does not apply to *tener* ‘have’.

Von Heusinger & Kaiser 2007a discuss the marking of objects in Spanish with reference to the referentiality scale ‘personal pronoun > proper noun > definite NP > indefinite specific NP > indefinite non-specific NP’. After showing that the general rule in contemporary European Spanish is that the cut between *a*-marked and unmarked human objects is below non-specific indefinites, they adopt the hypothesis that, with ordinary transitive verbs, the human objects that are not marked with *a* can be characterized in terms of the type of noun in the sense of the

<sup>2</sup> On Tsunoda’s scale of one (highest) to seven (lowest), verbs of knowledge are ranked four, whereas verbs of possession are ranked six.

<sup>3</sup> Note that, in these examples, in addition to the lexical meaning and the TAM value of the main verb, the use of the indicative in the relative clause unambiguously triggers a referential reading, since a non-referential reading of nouns modified by a relative clause requires the use of the subjunctive.

theory of types: argument type *e* vs. non-argumental type  $\langle e, t \rangle$ . In the perspective of the question addressed in this paper, it is not necessary to discuss this particular explanation. What is crucial is that, in contemporary Spanish, *tener* ‘have’ constitutes an exception to the general rule according to which object NPs that are both human and specific must normally be marked with *a*.

Consequently, in present-day Spanish, the possessive construction with *tener* ‘have’ is not fully identical to the prototypical transitive construction from which it originates. Historically, *tener* is a transitive verb whose original meaning ‘hold’ is classified as ‘Type one’ (direct effect on patient) on Tsunoda’s scale of transitivity. In the expression of possession, *tener* has replaced the Romance verb of possession *haber*, and as a consequence of this semantic shift, *tener* has acquired object marking properties that distinguish it from more typical transitive verbs.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Existential use of transitive verbs of possession: the case of Serbo-Croat

Slavic languages have transitive verbs of possession which historically developed from an Indo-European root reconstructed with the meaning ‘take’.<sup>5</sup> In Serbo-Croat,<sup>6</sup> *imati* ‘have’ expresses possession in a construction in which the possessor NP is in the nominative and the possessee in the accusative, like the agent and the patient of prototypical transitive verbs, but this verb is also found in an existential construction, i.e. a construction expressing presence of an entity at a given location.

In languages in which a transitive verb of possession is also used to encode existence, the existential construction may have particularities that distinguish it from the possessive construction it originates from. For example, in French – Ex. (3), the obligatory presence of an expletive locative clitic distinguishes *il y a* ‘there is’ from *il a* ‘he has’.

#### (3) French

a. *Il a un chien.*

3SG:M have:PRS:3SG INDEF:SG:M dog:SG

‘He has a dog.’ (*Il* is interpreted as representing a 3rd person masculine possessor)

b. *Il y a un chien dans le jardin*

3SG:M there have:PRS:3SG INDEF:SG:M dog:SG in DEF:SG:M garden:SG

‘There is a dog in the garden.’ (*Il* is interpreted as a mere place-holder in an impersonal construction)

In Jóola-Banjál (Atlantic), in canonical verbal predication, the verb includes an obligatory prefix expressing agreement with the subject, and the existential use of *ebaj* ‘have’ is immediately recognizable by the absence of this subject marker. In Ex. (4), sentences (a) and (b) are canonical transitive clauses in which the possessor in subject role is cross-referenced

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to mention here the similar behavior of Neapolitan *tené(re)*. As discussed by Ledgeway (2009: 841 ff.), in Neapolitan too, *a* is normally not used with the object of *tené(re)*, unless it is followed by a predicative complement.

<sup>5</sup> Latin *emo* ‘buy’ is a reflex of the same Indo-European root.

<sup>6</sup> The Serbo-Croat data presented here has been checked by Ana Kondić.

on the verb by a prefixed subject marker, whereas (c) is an impersonal construction immediately recognizable as such by the absence of the otherwise obligatory subject marker.

(4) Jóola-Banjál

- a. *Ni-baj-e ji-iba (ni e-poc-om).*  
 1SG-have-PF CL11-knife in CL3-bag-1SG  
 ‘I have a knife (in my bag).’
- b. *Atejo na-baj-e gu-ññil futox.*  
 Atéjo CL1-have-PF CL2-child five  
 ‘Atéjo has five children.’
- c. *Baj-e ji-iba ni e-poc yayu.*  
 have-PF CL11-knife in CL3-bag CL3:DEF  
 ‘There is a knife (in the bag).’

In Mandinka (Mande), the distinction between the possessive and existential uses of *soto* ‘have’ can be described as a particular type of P-lability: *soto* ‘have’ occurs in a transitive construction with the possessor in subject role and the possessee in object role, whereas the sole argument of *soto* ‘be available, exist’ is encoded as the subject of an intransitive predication.

(5) Mandinka

- a. *Ǿ máŋ bataakuu soto.*  
 1SG PF.NEG problem have  
 ‘I have no problem.’ (transitive predication with *Ǿ* ‘I’ in subject function and *bataakuu* ‘problem’ in object function)
- b. *Bataakuu máŋ soto.*  
 problem PF.NEG have  
 ‘There is no problem.’ (intransitive predication with *bataakuu* ‘problem’ in subject function)

It may also happen that, in languages having a transitive verb of possession also used to express existence, some sentences are ambiguous between a possessive and an existential reading. For example, in Wolof (Atlantic), the sentence in Ex. (6) can be understood as a possessive predication in which the 3rd person mark expresses agreement with an unexpressed possessor whose identity must be retrieved from the context (‘(S)he has a horse’), or an impersonal existential construction in which the 3rd person form of the verb constitutes the default choice in the absence of a subject governing agreement (‘There is a horse’).

## (6) Wolof

*Am na fas.*

have PRF.3SG horse

‘(S)he has a horse.’ or ‘There is a horse.’

In Serbo-Croat, *ima* ‘(S)he has’ and *ima* ‘there is’ are distinguished by their case assigning properties.

In Serbo-Croat, differential object marking is restricted to some declension types, and nominals belonging to some other declension types at least have unambiguous accusative forms. As illustrated by Ex. (7a-b), when NPs including such nominals encode the figure in the existential construction headed by *ima* ‘there is’, they may be in the nominative, which prevents confusion with the possessive construction, in which the NP representing the possessee is in the accusative – Ex. (7c).

(7) a. *Ima jedna cura u sokaku mome.*  
 have:PRS:3SG one:F:SG:NOM girl:SG:NOM in street:SG:LOC my:M:SG:LOC  
 ‘There is a girl in my street.’ (title of a song)

b. *Ima jedna krčma u planini.*  
 have:PRS:3SG one:F:SG:NOM inn:SG:NOM in mountain:SG:LOC  
 ‘There is an inn in the mountain.’ (title of a song)

c. *Ima jednu krčmu u planini.*  
 have:PRS:3SG one:F:SG:ACC inn:SG:ACC in mountain:SG:LOC  
 ‘(S)he has an inn in the mountain.’

Such examples show that, in the existential use of the transitive verb of possession *imati*, the possessee reanalyzed as the figure in a spatial configuration has undergone a change in its case marking properties resulting in the possibility of nominative marking. This change, which probably started with the re-analysis of accusative forms homonymous with the nominative, reinforces the distinction between the existential construction and the transitive possessive construction from which it developed. Note however that, in spite of its possibility of nominative marking, the NP representing the figure in the existential construction with *imati* illustrated by Ex. (8a) cannot be analyzed as an inverted subject in a more or less canonical intransitive construction, since in the plural, the genitive must be used in conditions in which intransitive subjects (even in postverbal position) are normally in the nominative, and the verb does not show plural agreement – Ex. (8b).

(8) a. *Ima lijepa djevojka u ovoj kući.*  
 have:PRS:3SG pretty:F:SG:NOM girl:SG:NOM in this:F:SG:LOC house:SG:LOC  
 ‘There is a pretty girl in this house.’

b. *Ima lijepih djevojaka u ovom selu.*  
 have:PRS:3SG pretty:F:PL:GEN girl:PL:GEN in this:N:SG:LOC village:SG:LOC  
 ‘There are pretty girls in this village.’

#### 4. Possessive predication originating from existential predication: the case of Finnish

Examples such as (9)<sup>7</sup> may suggest that the Finnish possessive construction illustrated by (9b) is nothing more than a particular case of an existential construction of the type commonly described in terms of locative inversion, with the possessor and the possessee fully aligned with the orienter and the figure, respectively.

##### (9) Finnish

a. *Kadulla on auto.*  
 street:SG:ADESS be:PRS:3SG car:SG:NOM  
 ‘There is a car in the street.’

b. *Pekalla on auto.*  
 Pekka:SG:ADESS be:PRS:3SG car:SG:NOM  
 ‘Pekka has a car.’

However, a closer look at case marking reveals that, in the possessive construction, the NP in the role of possessee has acquired case marking properties that depart from those of inverted subjects and are more similar to those of objects. The point is that, in Finnish, the case marking of subjects and objects is largely ambiguous. In particular, nominative marking is not decisive, since in constructions that do not include a nominative subject (for example, in the imperative), object NPs may be in the nominative,<sup>8</sup> and personal pronouns are the only nominals having an accusative form that unambiguously marks their use in object function.

In the locative inversion construction illustrated by Ex. (9a), the status of the NP in postverbal position as an inverted subject is corroborated by the impossibility to have an accusative-marked personal pronoun in this position. By contrast, as illustrated by Ex. (10c-d),<sup>9</sup> in the possessive construction, pronouns in possessee role are usually in the accusative case, which excludes analyzing them as inverted subjects.

##### (10) Finnish

c. *Pekalla on hänet*  
 Pekka:ADESS be:PRS:3SG 3SG:ACC  
 ‘Pekka has her’

d. *?Pekalla on hän*  
 Pekka:ADESS be:PRS:3SG 3SG:NOM

<sup>7</sup> The Finnish data presented here has been checked by Seppo Kittilä.

<sup>8</sup> ‘In Finnish clauses when there is no overt subject in the nominative case, the direct nominal object is not in the accusative but is in the nominative (or the partitive where it is not fully affected)... The accusative case is therefore only assigned in instances where it is necessary to distinguish the subject from the object.’ (Sands & Campbell 2001: 279).

<sup>9</sup> According to Sands & Campbell 2001, for many native speakers, sentence (10d) is barely acceptable, and can be used only in very particular contexts.

A plausible explanation is that, as discussed in detail in section 6 below, 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 control. Consequently, in a locative inversion construction whose use had been extended to the expression of possession, the syntactically ambiguous nominative marking of the NP representing the possessee has been re-analyzed as encoding object rather than subject function, and this re-analysis subsequently concretized with the possible use of unambiguous accusative forms in the same syntactic slot.

## 5. Possessive predication originating from comitative predication: the case of Tswana

### 5.1. The synchronic data

In Tswana (Bantu),<sup>10</sup> predicative possession involves the comitative preposition *le* ‘with’, whose use in the function of comitative adjunct marker is illustrated by Ex. (11).

(11) Tswana

*O ka ya le Kitso.*  
 2SG POT go with Kitso  
 ‘You may go with Kitso.’

As indicated in (12), the preposition *le* ‘with’ has an optional variant *na-* found only with the 3rd person pronouns and with the 2nd person singular pronoun (but neither with the 2nd person plural pronoun nor with the 1st person pronouns).

(12) The variant *na* of the Tswana comitative preposition *le*

<i>le wena</i>	‘with you’	= <i>na-o</i> [náù]
<i>le ene</i>	‘with him/her (cl. 1)’	= <i>na-e</i>
<i>le bone</i>	‘with them (cl. 2)’	= <i>na-bo</i>
<i>le one</i>	‘with it (cl. 3)’	= <i>na-o</i> [nàó]
<i>le one</i>	‘with it/them (cl. 6)’	= <i>na-o</i> [nàó]
etc.		

Historically, the variant *na-* (which has the very limited distribution described above and is never obligatory) is a reflex of the Proto-Bantu comitative preposition *\*na*, whereas the productive variant *le* has obvious cognates in the other Southern Bantu languages only, and its etymology remains a mystery.

In Tswana, predicative possession is most commonly expressed by a construction involving the irregular and defective verb *na*. Since this verb occurs exclusively in comitative and possessive predications, it can be glossed as ‘be with’. This gloss is however problematic in positive clauses, since if the inflection of *na* ‘be with’ expresses positive polarity, its

<sup>10</sup> The Tswana data presented here have been provided by Anderson Monthusi Chebanne. For general information on Tswana grammar, see Cole 1955, Creissels 2003.

complement is obligatorily (and redundantly) introduced by the comitative preposition *le* ‘with’, irrespective of the distinction between accompaniment and possession – Ex. (13a-b). One may thus wonder whether the meaning ‘with’ is really inherent to *na*.

## (13) Tswana

- a. *Ke na le Kitso.*  
 1SG be\_with with [CL1]Kitso  
 ‘I am with Kitso.’
- b. *Ke na le ma-di.*  
 1SG be\_with with CL6-money  
 ‘I have money.’
- c. \**Ke na Kitso.*  
 1SG be\_with Kitso
- d. \**Ke na madi.*  
 1SG be\_with money

The analysis of *na* as a purely formal element whose function would be limited to establishing a relationship between a subject NP and a preposition phrase in predicate function is however ruled out by its behavior in negative clauses. In addition to its defectiveness and morphological irregularity, *na* ‘be with’ has indeed a property it shares with no other Tswana verb: if its inflection expresses negative polarity, the preposition *le* combined to the NP representing the possessee is syntactically optional, and its presence depends on the meaning intended. As illustrated by Ex. (14), in negative clauses headed by *na*, the preposition *le* is used if the meaning is clearly comitative, but does not occur in the expression of possessive relationships.

## (14) Tswana

- a. *Ga ke na le Kitso.*  
 NEG 1SG be\_with with [CL1]Kitso  
 ‘I am not with Kitso.’ (comitative)
- b. *Ga ke na ma-di.*  
 NEG 1SG be\_with CL6-money  
 ‘I do not have money.’ (possessive)

Note however that, as illustrated by Ex. (15), this rule does not apply to the variant *na-* of the comitative preposition, which can be present even in negative clauses expressing possession.

## (15) Tswana

*Ga ke na na-o.*  
 NEG 1SG be\_with with-CL6  
 ‘I do not have any (money).’

To summarize, depending on polarity and on the precise meaning intended, the verb *na* ‘be with’ may occur in a construction having a superficial resemblance to transitive predication – Ex. (14b), or in a construction in which its complement is redundantly introduced by the comitative preposition.

Two additional observations are important for the analysis of the possessive construction of Tswana. The first one is that the resemblance between the construction of *na* without the preposition *le* and canonical transitive predication is only superficial. The point is that, in canonical transitive predication, the object argument can be represented either by an NP immediately following the verb, as in (16a), or by an object marker inserted immediately before the verb stem, as in (16b).

## (16) Tswana

a. *Ga ke batle ma-di.*  
 NEG 1SG want:PRS:NEG CL6-money  
 ‘I do not want (the) money.’

b. *Ga ke a batle.*  
 NEG 1SG CL6 want:PRS:NEG  
 ‘I do not want it.’

By contrast, even in the negative clauses in which the absence of the comitative preposition makes it superficially similar to an object, the complement of *na* ‘be with’ cannot be pronominalized by means of an object marker preceding the verb stem, and can only be pronominalized in the way illustrated by (15) above, that is, like comitative adjuncts.

The second observation important to mention here is that, in tenses for which the defective verb *na* ‘be with’ has no available form, for example in the subjunctive – Ex. (17), possessive predication is commonly rendered by means of a verb *nna*.<sup>11</sup> The etymological meaning of *nna* is probably ‘sit’, but it is now found in all the functions fulfilled by copulative verbs such as English *be*. What is crucial here is that this variant of possessive predication invariably includes the preposition *na*.

## (17) Tswana

*Go tshwanetse gore o nne le thipa fa a ya go tsoma.*  
 CL15/17 must:PRF that 2SG be:SUBJ with [CL9]knife if 2SG go INF hunt  
 ‘You must have a knife if you go hunting.’

<sup>11</sup> The first *n* of *nna* represents a syllabic nasal.

## 6.2. A diachronic hypothesis

The historical scenario underlying the puzzling situation described in Section 6.1 is not entirely clear,<sup>12</sup> but it must be taken into account that, in Bantu languages, as illustrated by Ex. (18), predicative possession is commonly expressed by a non-verbal predicative construction in which the comitative preposition *na* inherited from Proto-Bantu combines with a proclitic subject pronoun, that is, a construction superficially similar to that found in Tswana with *na* ‘be with’ in the negative.

(18) Swahili

*Ni-na vitabu vingi.*  
1SG-with CL7:book CL7:many  
‘I have many books.’

Starting from that, it is reasonable to think that the irregular and defective Tswana verb *na* ‘be with’ results from the hybridization of *nna* ‘be’ with *na* ‘with’ used in a construction of the type illustrated by the Swahili example (18). The result of this hybridization is a verb *na* ‘be with’ with a very limited and irregular inflection and two alternative constructions:

- the construction illustrated by Ex. (13a-b) & (14a); this construction is similar to that of the verb *nna* ‘be’, which by itself does not express accompaniment, and must therefore combine with the comitative preposition in order to express accompaniment or possession;
- the construction illustrated by Ex. (14b); this construction is similar to the construction involving a preposition *na* ‘with’ in other Bantu languages, which expresses accompaniment without necessitating the addition of anything else, but it cannot be analyzed as involving a preposition phrase in predicate function, since *na* is not productively used as a preposition in Tswana.

Whatever the precise details of this scenario, what is important to emphasize here is that it is reasonable to think that, originally, the situation of Tswana was not different from that found in the vast majority of Bantu languages, in which possessive predication is straightforwardly treated as a particular case of comitative predication. But this situation has evolved in such a way that in Tswana (and in other Southern Bantu languages), possessive predication is now formally distinct (at least in some conditions) from comitative predication, and when the distinction is apparent, the possessive construction has some semblance of a construction involving a transitive verb of possession.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

The evolutions analyzed in sections 2 to 5 can be viewed as readjustments triggered by the semantic specificity of constructions that have developed from source constructions on the

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<sup>12</sup> In particular, I have no explanation to propose for the fact that the formal similarity with transitive predication is limited to negative clauses.

basis of a semantic affinity between the meanings expressed, but nevertheless tends to acquire formal features that distinguish them from their source construction.

The loss of transitive features in existential constructions involving a transitive verb of possession is not really surprising. What is more puzzling is that possessive constructions originating from sources other than transitive predication (such as existential predication, as in Finnish, or comitative predication, as in Tswana) may acquire transitive features, whereas possessive constructions originating from transitive predication tend to depart from canonical transitive predication.

Such evolutions can be viewed as a particular case of interaction between semantic types of nouns and semantic roles in argument expression (Aristar 1997): a semantic extension of a given construction is forced by the presence of nouns that suggest an interpretation semantically related to the prototypical meaning of the construction but nevertheless different, and once the polysemy has fixed, a formal differentiation between the uses of the polysemous construction may develop under the pressure of the semantic roles expressed.

In the particular case of evolutions involving possessive predication, a possible explanation of the apparently contradictory evolutions described in the preceding sections is the ambiguous status of the notion of possession with respect to control.

I have mentioned in section 2 above the current view, expressed in particular by Tsunoda 1985, according to which verbs like English *have* rank near/at the bottom of the scale of transitivity. This is unquestionably true for some uses of *have*, but not all, and it is more correct to analyze *have* as a verb whose transitivity may vary depending on the nature of its arguments, as illustrated e.g. by *I have a brother* vs. *I have a car*. What I would like to emphasize here is that analyzing *have* as ambiguous with respect to transitivity is necessary in order to understand not only evolutions like those described in the previous sections of this paper, but also the emergence of transitive verbs of possession in the history of languages.

What makes the unity of the situations encoded by possessive constructions is the notion of personal sphere of an individual,<sup>13</sup> but the relationships between an individual and the entities that can be viewed as included in his/her personal sphere are very diverse with respect to the notion of control, ranging from situations in which the possessor can be characterized as controlling the relationship (*He has money*) to situations in which the possessor undergoes it (*He has cancer*),<sup>14</sup> and including situations that can be characterized as symmetric with respect to control (*He has many friends*).

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 aligned with existential predication are so common, but this affinity should not be overestimated. 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. 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’.

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<sup>13</sup> For a detailed discussion of this point, see Creissels 1979.

<sup>14</sup> Not surprisingly, in many languages, a sentence whose literal translation is *Cancer caught him* constitutes the usual way to describe this situation.

The claim that possessive predications in which the possessor and the possessee are encoded like the agent and the patient of typical transitive verbs constitute a typological oddity is however very far from true. To take just one example, transitive verbs of possession are extremely common in West African languages.

The existence of possessive relationships in which the possessor can be viewed as controlling the relationship accounts for possessive predications developing from transitive predication, and the ambiguity of many possessive relationships with respect to the notion of control accounts for possessive predications developing from comitative predication. However, whatever the source construction (existential predication, transitive predication or comitative predication), its extension to the whole domain of possession results in a contradiction between the control properties of the situations it originally encoded and those of part of the possessive relationships to which it has been extended. This contradiction favors further evolutions, and explains why so many languages have constructions expressing predicative possession that are fully aligned with none of the constructions that can be the historical source of possessive predication.

### **Abbreviations**

ACC: accusative  
ADESS: adessive  
CL: noun class  
DAT: dative  
F: feminine  
GEN: genitive  
INDEF: indefinite  
INF: infinitive  
LOC: locative  
M: masculine  
NEG: negation  
NOM: nominative  
PF: perfective  
PL: plural  
POT: potential  
PRF: perfect  
PRS: present  
SG: singular  
SUBJ: subjunctive

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