Expression of Attributive Possession in Tunisian Arabic: The Role of Language Contact

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1 Introduction

Possession is a universal concept that describes a particular link between two entities. It can denote a set of relationships that range from strict ownership to more loose connections that are open to interpretations. At the semantic level, a major distinction has been established between alienable possession and inalienable possession. Alienable possession refers to relationships that are temporary or which can be ended freely such as ownership of material objects. In the case of inalienable possession the possessed entity is intrinsically linked to the possessor, as in the case of part-whole relations (e.g., body parts) or kinship relations. Languages, however, vary when it comes to what counts as alienable vs. inalienable possession (Heine 1997; Payne and Barshi 1999; Herslund and Baron 2001). At the structural level, two major types of possessive structures exist. The first type, which is not the object of the current study, is predicative possession which uses verb forms to express the possessive link. The second type is attributive possession, also referred to as adnominal possession, which marks the possession in the noun phrase through different morphosyntactic structures.

Despite being such a common category, only a few studies have described change in the expression of possession in cases of language contact. Weinreich (1963) in his seminal work mentions the case of Estonian, Amharic, and Modern Hebrew which developed or increased the use of analytic possession constructions as a result of contact with other languages (Weinreich 1963: 41–42). Hickey (2010: 16) makes an argument for the role of Celtic languages in the change in Middle English towards the use of possessive pronouns with inalienable nouns instead of the old Germanic form that marked this type of possession through use of the personal dative. In the United States, a few studies have shown variation in the expression of possession in the speech of Hispanic speakers as a result of contact between Spanish and English (Wolford 2006; Montoya 2011; Orozco 2009). Montoya, in her study of second generation Hispanic immigrants to New York State, found that they extend the use of the possessive adjective to contexts where the Spanish definite article is the unmarked option in non-contact Spanish varieties. She attributes such
extension in the use of the possessive adjective to influence from English. In this paper the objective, then, is to look into the expression of attributive possession in Tunisian Arabic and the possible role that contact with French plays in the additional spread of the analytic form.

In Standard Arabic, synthetic constructions are formed by means of the construct state (ʔiḍafa): two nouns are juxtaposed, with the second noun being the possessor (N+N) as in (1), or through a suffixed pronominal possessor instead of a noun (N+PRO) as in (2). As mentioned by Eksell Harning (1980: 10), prepositions can also be used to express possession in Standard Arabic but the focus here is on attributive possession within the noun phrase and not on possession in other classes of phrases.

(1) kitaːbu Salma  
book Salma  
‘Salma’s book’

(2) kitaːbu-ha:
   book-GEN.3.SG.F  
‘her book’

Analytic constructions, understood here as constructions that are formed with the genitive exponent as opposed to constructions formed with prepositions, on the other hand, are non-existent in Standard Arabic, although they appear in the majority of the dialects (Eksell Harning 1980; Taine-Cheikh 2010; among others). In Maghrebi Arabic, in addition to the synthetic constructions mentioned for Standard Arabic, there are analytic constructions that are formed through the use of the genitive exponent mteːʕ, originally a noun meaning ‘possession’, or similar particles such as dyal in Moroccan Arabic, followed either by a lexical or a pronominal possessor:

(3) l-kteːb mteːʕ Salma 
    DEF-book of Salma  
‘Salma’s book’

(4) l-kteːb mteːʕ-ha
    DEF-book of-3.SG.F  
‘her book’

Much importance has been given to the value of the genitive exponent in showcasing the analytic nature of the dialects (Eksell Harning 1980), but also