

## On the expressions of possession in Amharic and Somali, and their prepositional elements *lä/la*

**1** This paper develops an analysis of possessive constructions in Somali and Amharic that starts out from the hypothesis that the relationship between a possessor and a possessum is established via a preposition, and that ‘have’ sentences are the result of incorporation of a prepositional element into an abstract copula (cf. Benveniste 1966 and recent generative work in that spirit). More specifically, I argue that *two* prepositional elements are involved in possessive constructions: a transitive preposition (which takes the possessor as its complement and the possessum as its subject) and an unaccusative particle (which takes the prepositional small clause as its complement; cf. Den Dikken 1995:Chapter 3). The ensuing analysis can elegantly account for the facts from Amharic and Somali — it captures their striking morphological parallel (both feature a prepositional element *lä/la* in addition to a copula) while at the same time accommodating a major syntactic distinction between the two: while in Somali the possessor behaves as a surface subject and the possessum has object properties, in Amharic it is the possessum that triggers subject properties whereas the possessor retains its object status. I analyze this difference between Amharic and Somali by identifying Somali *la* as an incorporated *preposition* (triggering possessor ascension) and treating Amharic *lä* as an incorporated *particle*, a grammaticalized incarnation of the transitive preposition.

**2** Den Dikken (1995:Chapter 3) argues that underlying possessive constructions is a structure of the type in (1a) (cf. French (2a)), with ‘have’ being derived via (i) inversion of the dative PP predicate with its subject, (ii) incorporation of the particle *Prt* into ‘BE’, and (iii) incorporation of the dative preposition into the verb (cf. (1b)). In French (2b), the morphological complex ‘BE+*Prt*+*P*’ is spelled out suppletively as a form of *avoir* ‘have’. The possessor controls subject agreement; the possessum is the surface object.

- (1) a. BE [*Prt* [<sub>SC</sub> [<sub>NP</sub> POSSESSUM] [<sub>PP</sub> *P* [<sub>NP</sub> POSSESSOR]]]]  
 b. [<sub>PP</sub> *t<sub>k</sub>* [<sub>NP</sub> POSSESSOR]]<sub>i</sub> BE+*Prt*<sub>j</sub>+*P*<sub>k</sub> [*t<sub>j</sub>* [<sub>SC</sub> [<sub>NP</sub> POSSESSUM] *t<sub>i</sub>*]]
- (2) a. cette maison est à Jean  
*this house is to Jean*  
 b. Jean a cette maison  
*Jean has this house*

**3** Amharic and Somali possessive constructions help underpin the analysis in (1) by procuring overt lexicalizations of the heads *Prt* and *P* in these structures. Consider the examples in (3) and (4):

- (3) a. reer baan Sagal **la** Ø-ahay (Somali *la*-PP)  
 relativeDPART Sagal with 1SUB-BE  
 b. makina-w **lä** aster näw (Amharic *lä*-PP)  
 car-the for aster BE
- (4) a. Sagal reer baan **lah**-d-ahay (Somali ‘have’)  
 Sagal relativeDPART *la*-AGRS-BE  
 b. Yohannīs ihit allä-č-w (Amharic ‘have’)  
 John sister BE-3SF.SU-3FS-OB

A first glance at (3) and (4) is that in both languages, the ‘be’+PP and ‘have’ constructions share in common a prepositional element (*la(h)* in Somali, *lä* in Amharic). In the examples in (4), we actually find this prepositional element incorporated into the copula (*ahay* in Somali (4a), *al* in Amharic (4b)). This provides morphological support for the incorporation analysis in (2); but it does not, as yet, support the presence of both a particle and a preposition in the structure of possessive constructions. A closer analysis of the agreement properties of the examples in (4) will do so.

**4** There is an important difference between the superficially similar examples in (4a) and (4b), concerning agreement: while in Somali the possessor controls *subject* agreement, in Amharic it entertains an agreement relationship with the *object marker*. In other words, the Somali example in (4a) is essentially parallel to French (2b) in involving possessor ascension to subject, but the Amharic example in (4b), while clearly involving an incorporated prepositional element, does not exhibit possessor ascension. Incorporation of the transitive preposition into the copula and raising of the possessor to subject go hand in hand; possessor ascension is a direct reflex of P–incorporation. In all likelihood, then, the incorporated element *lah* in Somali (4a) is the transitive preposition, triggering promotion of the possessor to subject and providing Case for the possessum, which comes to exhibit object properties. Amharic (4b), by contrast, does *not* involve possessor ascension: instead, it is the *possessum* that controls subject agreement in (4b), the possessor being cross-referenced on the complex verb by an object marker (which Yabe 2001 identifies as an object clitic). That makes (4b) essentially the opposite of French (2b) and Somali (4a) when it comes to subject and object distribution. Yet, like Somali (4a), Amharic (4b) features a prepositional element incorporated into the copula. The absence of possessor ascension prevents us from analyzing (4b) in terms of incorporation of the transitive P; still there unquestionably is a prepositional element incorporated — but this element is not the transitive P but the *particle* instead; P itself is null and does not incorporate.

**5** Thus, Somali provides morphosyntactic evidence for incorporation of the transitive P in the derivation of possessive ‘have’ constructions, while Amharic supports the incorporation of a particle Prt in these sentences. Amharic and Somali differ when it comes to which of the two heads they incorporate in getting from (1a) to a ‘have’ sentence; the morphophonology of the incorporated elements of the two languages is very similar, however: *la(h)/lä*. This suggests that they go back to a common ancestor. Arguably, Amharic *lä* is an incarnation of the transitive preposition that has *grammaticalized* into a particle — a view that fits in with the idea that particles are functional prepositions (cf. esp. Van Riemsdijk 1990).

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