

Existential and Possessive Constructions in Modern Standard Arabic Two Strategies Reflecting the Ontological (Non-)Autonomy of Located or Possessed Entities

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Abstract : Although languages use very divergent constructional strategies, all existential constructions appear to invariably involve an implicit or explicit locative constituent. This locative constituent either surface as a true locative phrase or are realized as a possessor noun phrase. However, while much research focuses on the supposed underlying syntactic relation of locative and possessive existential constructions, not much is known about possible semantic factors that could govern the choice between these constructions. The main question that we address in this talk concerns the choice between the two related constructions in Modern Standard Arabic (MAS). Although both are used to express the existence of something somewhere, we can distinguish three contexts: First, for some types of entities, only the EL construction is possible (e.g. (1a) *ṭammata rağulun fi l-ḥadiqati* vs. (1b) **(kāna) ladā l-ḥadiqati rağulun*). Second, for other types of entities, only the possessive construction is possible (e.g. (2a) *ladā ṭ-ṭawilati aklun dā'iriyyun* vs. (2b) **ṭammata šaklun dā'iriyyun ladā/fi ṭ-ṭawilati*). Finally, for still other entities, both constructions can be found (e.g. (3a) *ṭammata ḥubbun lā yūšafu ladā ḡārī li-zawğati-hi* and (3b) *ladā ḡārī ḥubbun lā yūšafu li-zawğati-hi*). The data covering a range of ontologically different entities (concrete objects, events, body parts, dimensions, essential qualities, feelings, etc.) shows that the choice between the existential locative and the possessive constructions is closely linked to the conceptual autonomy of the existential theme with respect to its location or to the whole that it is a part of. The construction with *ṭammata* is the only possible one to express the existence of a fully autonomous (i.e. nondependent) entity (concrete objects (e.g.1) and abstract objects such as events, especially the ones that Grimshaw called 'simple events'). The possessive construction with *(kāna) ladā* is the only one used to express the existence of fully non-autonomous (i.e. fully dependent on a whole) entities (body parts, dimensions (e.g. 2), essential qualities). The two constructions alternate when the existential theme is conceptually dependent but separable of the whole, either because it has an autonomous (independent) existence of the given whole (spare parts of an object), or because it receives a relative autonomy in the speech through a modifier (accidental qualities, feelings (e.g. 3a, 3b), psychological states, among some other kinds of themes). In this case, the modifier expresses an approximate boundary on a scale, and provides relative autonomy to the entity. Finally, we will show that kinship terms (e.g. son), which at first sight may seem to constitute counterexamples to our hypothesis, are nonetheless supported by it. The ontological (non-)autonomy of located or possessed entities is also reflected by morpho-syntactic properties, among them the use and the choice of determiners, pluralisation and the behavior of entities in the context of associative anaphora.

Keywords : existence, possession, autonomous entities, non-autonomous entities

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