

The verbs ‘to have’ and ‘to exist’ in Oromo with comparison to Amharic: periphrastic possessive predicates

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In Oromo (a Cushitic language in Ethiopia), existence or location is expressed by the verb *dʒir-* ‘exist/there be’ and possession by a transitive verb *k’ab-* ‘have’. The former is also employed in some context-specific possessive predication, and the latter (i.e., the possessive verb) has a homophonous referential verb *k’ab-* ‘hold, grab’ which in turn grammaticalizes to possession (Wakweya, Desalegn & Meyer 2019). Thus, Oromo shows both Location and Action Schemas in light of Heine’s (1997) schematic types of possessive constructions.

- (1) *boonsaa bira k’arfii-n dʒir-a*
Bonsa.ABS near money-NOM exist-3SG.M.IPFV
‘Bonsa has money.’
- (2) *boonsaa-n k’arfii k’ab-at-ee-r-a*
Bonsa-NOM money.ABS hold-MID-PFV.CVB-AUX-3SG.M.IPFV
‘Bonsa has money.’

The two constructions in (1) and (2) are the possessive predications expressing ownership relations, and they remain at odds with kinship or body part relations. There are also parallel constructions of both types in Amharic (the most predominant language in Ethiosemitic).

The Action Schema is almost non-existent in Ethiosemitic except for the verb *yazə* ‘hold, seize’ as a possessive predicator in Amharic (Baye 1997). This special possessive construction in Amharic as shown in (3) below resembles the Oromo type given in (2), and they usually involve the perfect aspect marking auxiliaries.

- (3) *kassa bizu gənzəb yiz-o-all*
Kassa much money hold.3SG.M-CVB-AUX.IPFV
‘Kasa has a lot of money.’

The Location schema is found in the Cushitic languages not as independent developments but resulting from Ethiosemitic influence (Crass & Meyer 2008). The Action Schema is a Cushitic feature (cf. Thomason 1983) whereas the Location Schema is originally the Ethiosemitic type (Weninger 2011; Crass and Meyer 2008). Hence, it is probably the case that the Location Schema in Oromo comes from Amharic influence, and the Action Schema in Amharic is from the Oromo influence as a mutual feature exchange.

This paper aims to describe syntactic and semantic properties of the Location and Action Schemas in Oromo in relation to their parallel constructions in Amharic. As in (4) below are special patterns involving Location and Action Schemas in Oromo and Amharic.

- (4) a. *k’ab-*+AUX ‘has held’ > ‘have’
b. *bira+dʒir-* ‘exists near’ > ‘have’
c. *harka+dʒir-* ‘exists at hand’ > ‘have’

Like the Amharic verb *yazə* ‘hold, seize’, the Oromo referential verb *k’ab-* ‘hold, grab’ combines with the perfect aspect auxiliary. In the Location Schema, the locative possessor

often takes a sentence-initial position followed by an indefinite possessed subject in Oromo, and the same is true for Amharic. Thus, the cross-linguistic effect of word order and definiteness in the predicative possession constructions reported by linguists like Clark (1978) holds for both languages. These two languages of Ethiopia are probably developing these periphrastic possessive constructions due to their contact for centuries.

Key words: *existential verbs, possession, action-denoting verbs, periphrastic constructions, language contact, comparison.*

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