

How many possessive constructions exist in Maltese?

Recent theories of lexical semantics, in particular those within the Generative Lexicon (GL) paradigm (Pustejovsky, 1995) have emphasized the importance of enriching the internal semantic structure of lexical items, thus enabling the compositional interpretation of linguistic expressions while accounting for context-dependent modulation of meaning. The possessive construction is of interest with respect to such theories in that a compositional interpretation is difficult to derive, unless some level of semantic structure is posited from which an abstract relation can be specified in context. This is mainly due to the wide range of interpretations to which the construction is amenable.

Maltese has two types of possessive constructions. The Construct State Construction (CSC) is mainly restricted to inalienable possession and kinship terms (e.g. Fabri, 1996; Koptevskaja-Tamm, 1996). On the other hand, the Periphrastic Possessive Construction (PPC) involving the preposition *ta'* ('of'), is unrestricted and is also used to express a variety of relations between the head and non-head constituents, many of which do not express a possessive relation in the standard sense. Examples are given in (1).

The main focus of this paper is a subclass of the PPC that involves a head-modifier relationship, and closely parallels the English modificational possessive (MP; e.g. Munn, 1995). The distinction between MPs such as (1b) and regular possessives (RP) such as (1a) is hard to pin down; indeed, previous analyses of Maltese possessive constructions such as Koptevskaja-Tamm (1996) consider the PPC to be a unitary class expressing a variety of semantic relationships. However, the two types of constructions differ along a number of dimensions, namely:

- a. *Definiteness*: The head noun in a RP is always definite (that is, cannot occur without a definite article), and the whole phrase is understood as definite. This makes it akin to the CSC. Thus regular possessive NPs warrant a DP analysis. The modificational possessive is not definite, although it can be preceded by a determiner. An NP analysis seems to fit the facts better.
- b. *Stacking*: In cases of stacking such as those shown in (2a), the entire NP *sikkina tal-hobz* can function as the head of the RP construction. An RP construction functioning as the head of another possessive phrase, as in (2b), would result in a semantic anomaly. This seems to point towards some kind of semantic cohesiveness of the MP, one that is further corroborated by the fact that the MP is intuitively felt to refer to a single entity (and not to a possessed and a possessor as in the RP). This referential property seems to be such that the head achieves specification as to its *sort* from the modifier.
- c. While MPs fail standard tests of Lexical Integrity proposed by Bresnan and Mchombo (1995), they nevertheless appear to undergo certain syntactic processes, in particular coordination, which preserve their referential properties. Thus, in (3a), the modifier *tal-hobz* specifies the head with reference to its *telic* role (that is, what it is used for). Coordination involving an additional modifier that violates this role results in a semantic anomaly (compare 3b and 3c). Nevertheless, the evidence of their "syntactic transparency" seems to mitigate against the type of Lexicalist or compounding analysis of these MPs offered by Shimamura (2000) among others. Furthermore, MPs do allow internal adjectival modification, albeit resulting in a marked structure. However, this does not exclude the possibility of lexicalisation (perhaps through frequency of usage), as per the example in (4), which are utterly non-compositional.

Thus it appears that there are in fact two types of PPC in Maltese, the MP and the RP. The latter is semantically akin to the CSC. Ideally, these two constructions could be treated as two variants of the same construction, their structural differences being reflexes of a semantic distinction between heads belonging to different semantic types. One possible analysis would in fact rely on a distinction between a functional/relational nominal type which is inherently definite and coincides with the class of nominals referred to as inalienable; and a non-relational nominal type. In the case of the former, the type triggers a CSC possessive. In the case of the latter, occurrence in a possessive construction results in a definiteness feature being added to the nominal as a result of a more general mechanism of type coercion (e.g. Partee and Borschev, 2000). If this analysis is correct, then there is a single RP construction in Maltese with two structural variants – the CSC and the PPC – related to the inherent definiteness and relationality of the nouns involved.

With regard to MPs, it will be argued that the variety of semantic relationships observed between head and modifier and the type of semantic cohesiveness shown above can be accounted for by positing a different syntactic structure underlying MPs as well as a rich theory of lexical semantic representation and selection such as that offered by GL. The analysis could be extended to English Modificational Possessives as well.

Examples

- (1) a. il-karozza ta' Ganni
DEF-car of John
'John's car'
b. politika ta' konfrontazzjoni
politics of confrontation
'confrontation politics'
- (2) a. Is-sikkina tal-hobz ta' Ganni
DEF-knife of-DEF-bread of John
'John's bread knife'
b. *Is-sikkina ta' Ganni ta' Pietru
DEF-knife of John of Peter
'Peter's and John's knife'
- (3) a. sikkina tal-hobz
knife of-DEF-bread
'bread-knife'
b. sikkina tal-hobz u (ta)l-kejkijiet
knife of-DEF-bread and (of-)DEF cakes
'a bread and cake knife'
c. *sikkina tal-hobz u (ta)l-plastik
knife of-DEF bread and (of-)DEF-plastic
'a bread and plastic knife'
- (4) Ghasfur tal-bejt
Bird of-DEF-roof
'sparrow'

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