

# THE GRAMMATICALIZATION OF ALIENABLE POSSESSION IN MAKKAN ARABIC

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## 1. Introduction

Many of the world's languages grammaticalize a distinction between inalienable and alienable possession. Inalienable possession is defined as an inherited, inseparable, permanent semantic relationship between two nominals, the possessee and the possessor, while alienable possession is an acquired, separable, changing relationship between the possessee and the possessor (see Nichols 1988, 1992; Heine 1997; Alexiadou 2003). Such a dichotomy does not exist in Standard Arabic (henceforth SA) in which possession is expressed by simple juxtaposition of the possessee and the possessor nominals, a structure known as the Semitic construct state (see Benmamoun and Choueiri 2013). However, in Makkan Arabic (henceforth MA), the Urban Hijazi Arabic spoken in the city of Makkah, Saudi Arabia, an alternative analytic possessive construction has emerged with the functional morpheme *ħag* as a genitive exponent that occurs between the possessee and the possessor nominals. This periphrastic possessive construction is specific to alienable possession and is assumed to signify the emergence of the alienability split in MA. In this paper, I provide an account for such a change within the framework of grammaticalization and discuss the principles by which it has been motivated. Besides, I trace the pathway of the change and demonstrate how it adheres to principles of grammaticalization, and thus is a legitimate case of grammaticalization.

This paper proceeds as follows: §2 discusses the synthetic possessive construction in Arabic and the analytic construction that has emerged in MA. The source of the possessive morpheme *ħag* and its grammaticalization as a genitive exponent is discussed in §3. The motivating factors underlying the evolution of the periphrastic possessive construction and its limitation to alienable position are discussed in §4. The conclusion in §5 summarizes the main sections of the paper and discusses the development from synthetic to analytic constructions as a pervasive phenomenon in modern Arabic dialects.

## 2. Possession in Arabic

This section discusses possession in Standard and Makkan Arabic. The synthetic possessive construction common in SA, the construct state, is referred to as the original construction whereas the periphrastic, genitive exponent, possessive construction that has evolved in MA is referred to as the emergent construction.

## 2.1 Possession in SA

In SA, the oldest well-documented stage of Arabic, possession is expressed by simple juxtaposition of the possessee and the possessor nominals (Possessee + Possessor), as in (1), a structure known as the Semitic construct state (Benmamoun and Choueiri 2013). In such structures the possessee nominals are incompatible with the definite article *al-*, as shown in (1) and (2).

- (1) (\*al)-kita:b Sami<sup>1</sup>  
 DEF-book Sami  
 ‘Sami’s book’

The possessor may also be a pronoun. If so, it has to be an enclitic pronoun attached to the possessee NP. As a morphologically complex language with a very rich templatic morphology (see Altantawy et al. 2011, Bouamor et al. 2014), Arabic employs a system of enclitic pronouns, classified by person (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup>), number (singular, dual, and plural), and gender (masculine vs. feminine), as markers of possession (representing the possessor). Thus, the possessive structure in (1) could be expressed using an enclitic pronoun (encliticization), as in (2) below:<sup>2</sup>

- (2) (\*al)-kita:b-u-h  
 DEF-book-NOM-3SG.M  
 ‘his book’

## 2.2 Possession in MA

In MA, besides the construct state of SA, an alternative possessive construction has emerged in which possession is expressed using the functional morpheme *ħag* between the possessee and the possessor.<sup>3</sup> This functional morpheme might be followed by a possessor NP, as in (3), or take an enclitic pronoun, as in (4).

- (3) (al)-kita:b ħag Sami  
 DEF-book POSS Sami  
 ‘Sami’s book’

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<sup>1</sup> The following symbols and abbreviations are used in my data: ħ = voiceless pharyngeal fricative, ʕ = voiced pharyngeal fricative, ɡ = voiced velar stop, ʒ = voiced palato-alveolar sibilant, ʃ = voiceless alveolar fricative, DEF = definite article, NOM = nominative case marker, 1 = first person, 3 = third person, SG = singular, PL = plural, M = masculine, F = feminine, POSS = possessive exponent.

<sup>2</sup> Both structures, juxtaposition and encliticization, will be generally referred to as juxtaposition and/or construct state constructions since the main point of the discussion is to distinguish them from the emergent analytic construction.

<sup>3</sup> In the present paper, the possessive marker *ħag* is considered a grammaticalized possessive exponent rather than a preposition meaning ‘of’ (cf. Bardeas 2009, Alrasheedi 2019).

- (4) (al)-kita:b ḥagg-i  
 DEF-book POSS-1SG  
 ‘my book’

When the morpheme *ḥag* is inserted between the possessee and the possessor, the resulting construction is no longer a construct state; hence, the possessee could be definite or indefinite as shown in (3) and (4) above.

This periphrastic construction is not always used alternatively with the construct state in MA since its usage is restricted to particular possessive relations, namely alienable possession, while it is incompatible with inalienably possessed nouns. Inalienable possession is defined as an unchanging, inherent, and/or permanent semantic relationship between two nominals, the possessee and the possessor, while alienable possession is a changing, acquired, context-dependent relationship between the possessee and the possessor (see Nichols 1988, 1992; Heine 1997; Alexiadou 2003, among others cited in this paper). The alienability split is grammaticalized in many of the world’s languages, like for example, Tauya (MacDonald 1990), Tigrinya (Gebregziabher 2012), Blackfoot (Ritter and Rosen 2014), and Mi’gmaq (McClay 2012), among many others (see Chapell and McGregor 1989).

While no evidence of inalienable/alienable distinction appears in Standard Arabic, the periphrastic possessive construction that has developed in MA clearly encodes the alienability split.<sup>4</sup> Cross-linguistically, kinship and body parts terms are prototypical members of the class of inalienably possessed nouns in languages that display distinct grammatical markings for inalienable vs. alienable possession (see Nichols 1992, Heine 1997, Alexiadou 2003, among many others). These two classes of nouns appear in construct state structures but are incompatible with the periphrastic possessive construction in MA, thus (5b) and (6b) are ungrammatical.

- (5) a. ṣamm-i  
 uncle-1SG  
 ‘my uncle’  
 b. \*ṣam ḥagg-i  
 uncle POSS-1SG  
 (int.) ‘my uncle’
- (6) a. riʒl-i  
 foot-1SG  
 ‘my foot’  
 b. \*riʒil ḥagg-at-i  
 foot POSS-F-1SG  
 (int.) ‘my foot’

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<sup>4</sup> Alshehri (2023) argues that the inalienable/alienable distinction is syntactic in SA.

Inalienability covers several semantic fields, which vary from one language to another. That is, members of the inalienable category cannot be predicted but are specified based on language-specific cultural conventions (Heine 1997, Chapell and McGregor 1989). A considerable body of research has suggested that whenever the alienability split is encoded in a language, inalienably possessed terms form a closed class with limited membership while the alienable category is always an open class (Nichols 1988, Heine 1997). The noun *ša:ħib* ‘friend’ seems to pattern with inalienably possessed nouns in MA since it is incompatible with the genitive exponent possessive construction, as shown in (7b).

- (7) a. *ša:ħb-i*  
friend-1SG  
‘my friend’
- b. \**ša:ħib ħagg-i*  
friend POSS-1SG  
(int.) ‘my friend’

The fact that the periphrastic possessive construction is exclusive to alienable possession is a clear indication for the emergence of the alienability split in MA.

The remainder of the paper focuses on the emergent possessive construction as a case of grammaticalization in MA. The grammaticalization of the possessive marker *ħag* from a noun to a genitive exponent is discussed in the following section.

### 3. The grammaticalization of the possessive exponent *ħag*

Grammaticalization has been defined as the process by which a lexical form receives a grammatical meaning besides its conventional lexical meaning or as the development of grammatical forms or constructions out of already existing ones (see Hopper 1996, Heine 1997, Heine and Kuteva 2004, Kuteva et al. 2019, among others cited in this paper). In this section the grammaticalization of the possessive genitive exponent *ħag* is discussed with reference to Hopper’s (1991, 1996) principles of grammaticalization, namely (i) layering, (ii) divergence, (iii) specialization, (iv) persistence, and (v) decategorialization, along with Heine and Kuteva’s (2004) four main mechanisms of grammaticalization, namely (i) extension, (ii) desemanticization, (iii) decategorialization, and (iv) erosion (see also Kuteva et al. 2019).

The possessive genitive exponent *ħag*, I assume, has been grammaticalized from the source noun *ħag*, which means ‘something that a person is legally or morally entitled to have, get, or do’ (the equivalent to the English noun *right*).<sup>5</sup> Unlike the source noun, the functional morpheme *ħag* occurs between two nominals, the possessee and the possessor,

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<sup>5</sup> Eifan (2017) assumes that the source form of the possessive morpheme *ħag* is the Egyptian noun *ħa:ga* ‘something or anything’, and that this grammaticalization reflects the influence of Egyptian Arabic on the Urban Hijazi Arabic, a proposal that the author of the present paper does not adopt.

which denotes the extension of its distribution to a new context that is distinct from the context of its original counterpart, the noun *ħag*. As mentioned previously, the possessive exponent accepts encliticization. Moreover, insertion of the functional word *ħag* between the possessee and the possessor nominals gives way to the deletion of the possessee if it could be inferred from the context. Therefore, the forms *ħag Sami* ‘Sami’s’, and *ħagg-i* ‘mine’ are attested forms in MA and are used alternatively with the full form (possessee *ħag* possessor) and the construct state structure, which conforms to Hopper’s (1991, 1996) principle of layering, the co-occurrence of multiple forms and/or structures in the lexical, as well as the grammatical domain of a given language. Following are the constructions that co-occur as attested possessive structures in MA (examples (1), (3), and (4) above are repeated, respectively, as (8), (10), and (11) below).

(8) *kita:b Sami*  
 book Sami  
 ‘Sami’s book’

(9) *kita:b-i*  
 book-1SG  
 ‘my book’

(10) (al)-*kita:b ħag Sami*  
 DEF-book POSS Sami  
 ‘Sami’s book’

(11) (al)-*kita:b ħagg-i*  
 DEF-book POSS-1SG  
 ‘my book’

(12) *ħag Sami*  
 POSS Sami  
 ‘Sami’s’

(13) *ħagg-i*  
 POSS-1SG  
 ‘mine’

This co-occurrence is in compliance with the premise that language change is a gradual process that does not take the form of an abrupt shift, but a gradual transition from using one form to using another emergent form. Throughout such a diachronic transition, areas appear in which the original form and the emergent one(s) co-exist and are equally attested by the language speakers (Hopper 1991, 1996; Hopper and Traugott 2003; Heine and Kuteva 2004; Kuteva et al. 2019).

As a grammaticalized functional morpheme, *ħag* has undergone semantic bleaching (desemanticization). That is, the sense of ‘something that a person is legally or morally

entitled to have, get, or do’ has been bleached and left behind its implied sense of possession/property. As a result, the functional morpheme *ħag* has acquired an abstract grammatical meaning as a mere possessive marker, and thus become divergent from the source form, the noun *ħag*. Nonetheless, it is evident that the morpheme *ħag* is not an empty syntactic element; rather, it still has remnants of its original meaning in the sense of ‘possession/property’. Consequently, the source noun *ħag* and the possessive genitive exponent *ħag* have become polysemous in MA, so *ħagg-i* is ambiguous between ‘my right’ (14a) and ‘mine’ (see (13) above, repeated as (14b) below).

- (14) a. *ħagg-i*  
right-1SG  
‘my right’
- b. *ħagg-i*  
POSS-1SG  
‘mine’

When contextualized, the two forms in (14) can be distinguished, and the intended meaning can easily be discerned since the two forms have different distributions. According to Hopper (1991), it can be anticipated that a form will be polysemous during intermediate stages of grammaticalization, and that at least one of its meanings will reflect previous dominant meaning. The resistance of *ħag* to undergo complete semantic bleaching or sudden emptying of meaning is in line with Hopper’s (1991, 1996) principle of persistence that relates the meaning of the grammaticalized item to its source, the lexical item out of which it has evolved.

The morpheme *ħag* has become grammaticalized in a particular context, the analytic possessive construction, but it retains its lexical status as a noun in other contexts. This is consistent with the mechanism of extension, use in a new context (Heine and Kuteva 2004, Kuteva et al. 2019). It is worth noting here that while the possessive marker *ħag* is confined to possessive constructions, the noun *ħag* has a wider distribution. However, the noun *ħag* seems to appear less frequently, and this observation conforms to Segalowitz and Lane’s (2000) account that access to function words is faster than access to content words, and thus function words tend to appear more frequently.

The choice of the noun *ħag* to be grammaticalized as a possessive marker is not an arbitrary one, but it has to do with the principle of specialization on the basis of textual frequency and semantic generalizations (see Hopper 1991, Hopper and Traugott 2003). As a lexical noun, *ħag* appears frequently in expressions of possession and property. That is, it is combined in discourse with property, ownership, and possession, as shown in the following examples:

- (15) al-kita:b    *ħag*    li-Sami  
DEF-book    right    for-Sami  
‘it is Sami’s right to have, get, or own the book’

- (16) al-kita:b min ĥag Sami  
 DEF-book of right Sami  
 ‘it is Sami’s right to have, get, or own the book’

The frequent occurrence of the lexical morpheme *ħag* ‘right’ in expressions of possession, I assume, has gradually led to the generalization of its meaning to denote ‘property’, which is directly related to the concept of possession (see Heine 1997, Heine and Kuteva 2004, Rubin 2004, Eifan 2017). Such generalization has set the noun *ħag* apart as a plausible candidate to undergo the process of grammaticalization and become a functional possessive morpheme. This premise is consistent with the conception of grammaticalization as a product of context-induced reinterpretation (see Heine 1997, Heine and Kuteva 2004, Kuteva et al. 2019).

The possessive marker *ħag* has lost its lexical category as a noun and become a functional morpheme. That is, it has been decategorialized. Decategorialization refers to the loss of morphological markers and syntactic properties of the lexical/or the source category (see Heine 1997, Heine and Kuteva 2004, Kuteva et al. 2019). As a noun, *ħag* can (i) be pluralized (inflected for number), as in (17), and (ii) take the bound definite article *al-*, as in (18). A combination of the two properties is exemplified in (19).

- (17) ĥugu:g al-ʔinsa:n  
 rights DEF-human  
 ‘the human rights’
- (18) al-ħag al-ʕa:m  
 DEF-right DEF-public  
 ‘the public right’
- (19) al-ħugu:g al-ʕa:mma  
 DEF-rights DEF-public  
 ‘the public rights’

However, when grammaticalized as a possessive morpheme, *ħag* has lost these two properties. Consequently, the possessive marker *ħag* does not inflect for number and is incompatible with the definite article *al-*, so (20) and (21) are ungrammatical.

- (20)\*al-kita:b al-ħag Sami  
 DEF-book DEF-POSS Sami  
 (int.) ‘Sami’s book’
- (21) al-kutub ĥugu:g Sami  
 DEF-books POSS.PL. Sami  
 (int.) ‘Sami’s books’

Nonetheless, grammaticalization does involve gains (Hopper and Traugott 2003, Kuteva et al. 2019), and in the present case *ħag* as a possessive morpheme is inflected for gender and, thus, agrees with the possessee for gender, a property which does not exist for the lexical source, the noun *ħag*.

(22) al-kita:b    ħagg-u  
 DEF-book    POSS-3SG.M  
 ‘his book’

(23) al-waraga    ħagg-at-u  
 DEF-paper    POSS-F-3SG.M  
 ‘his paper’

In Arabic, all nouns carry grammatical gender as either masculine or feminine. Nouns that refer to professions, like teacher, doctor, and engineer, have two distinct forms, one masculine and one feminine. Other nouns are either masculine or feminine and the gender category into which a noun falls is semantically arbitrary and is assigned by convention (see Holes 2004, Ryding 2005). The abstract noun *ħag* ‘right’ is masculine in Arabic, but the possessive marker *ħag* does not carry grammatical gender, and it agrees with the possessee in this respect. Since the noun *kita:b* ‘book’ is masculine in Arabic, the form *ħag* appears with it in (22). However, *waraga* ‘paper’ is feminine in Arabic, so the possessive morpheme *ħag* agrees with it by taking the feminine suffix *-at* in (23).

To sum up, this section sheds light on the compliance of the target possessive morpheme, *ħag*, with the principles and mechanisms of grammaticalization as identified by Hopper (1991, 1996), Heine (1997), Heine and Kuteva (2004), and Kuteva et al. (2019). Dissimilar to its source counterpart, the genitive exponent *ħag* occurs between two nominals (extension), and in such a context it is no longer a contentive morpheme but a functor (desemanticization). Forms such as *ħagg-i* ‘my right’ and *al-kita:b ħagg-i* ‘my book’ co-exist in MA (layering). And even after *ħag* has come to be used as a function word indicating possession, the noun *ħag* continues to be used and each form has its distinct distribution (divergence). From among a plethora of nouns denoting property in Arabic, only *ħag* has turned into a possessive morpheme (specialization). Moreover, as a possessive morpheme *ħag* still retains some vestiges of the original meaning of the source noun in the sense of ‘property’ (persistence), yet it lost its syntactic and morphological nominal characteristics (deategorialization). It is worth noting here that no evidence of erosion has been observed in the grammaticalization of *ħag*, and this is justifiable given that while some processes of grammaticalization can be universally observed, others, among which is erosion, could but need not occur (Heine and Reh 1984).

#### 4. Alienability split in MA

This section provides an account for the inalienable/alienable distinction in MA within the framework of grammaticalization. In §4.1, the grammaticalization of the periphrastic



possessive construction and its motivating factors are discussed. In §4.2, the exclusiveness of the emergent possessive construction to alienable possession and its incompatibility with alienable category are discussed with reference to the principles of iconicity and economy.

#### 4.1 The grammaticalization of alienability split in MA

This section discusses the emergence of the periphrastic alienable possessive construction (possessee *ħag* possessor) in MA in relation to the grammaticalization concepts of expressivity, routinization, renewal, economy, and pragmatic inferencing (see Heine 1997, Hopper and Traugott 2003). Expressivity plays a central role in the account for the alienability split in MA. The zero-marked possessive construction of mere juxtaposition of the possessee and the possessor has reached a very advanced stage in its grammaticalization to the extent that it has become routinized and worn out, and consequently, lost its expressivity. Loss of expressivity could also be the result of several diachronic forces that have triggered semantic bleaching effect (see Heine 1997). Therefore, a need has arisen to specify and emphasize the possessive relation between the two juxtaposed nominals, which induced renewal and led to the introduction of a more explicit periphrastic construction with an explicit possessive morpheme between the possessee and the possessor. According to Heine (1997), possessive markers are always chosen from among already existing words in the language. Moreover, they are drawn cross-linguistically from one of eight main sources, namely action, location, companion, genitive, goal, source, topic, and equation. In the case of MA, I assume that the possessive marker *ħag* follows the ‘equation pattern’ as possession seems to be equated with ‘right’ or ‘property’ in the sense “Y is X’s (property)” where X is the possessor and Y is the possessed noun (Heine 1997: 47).

In accordance with the principle of economy, using already existing forms for new purposes (Heine 1997), the possessive morpheme is selected from among already existing words, as mentioned previously, yet this selection is not arbitrary but is based on and influenced by pragmatic inferencing. Pragmatic inferences play a significant role in semantic change in general, and in grammaticalization in particular (see Heine 1997, Kuteva et al. 2019); however, for them to be effective, they must occur frequently (Hopper and Traugott 2003). As mentioned in §3 and exemplified in (15) and (16) above, the noun *ħag* ‘right’ occurs very frequently in expressions of possession in Arabic which resulted in a strong association between *ħag* ‘right’ and ‘possession’. Gradually, *ħag* has become an integral part of the possessive construction as it has acquired possessive denotations through the conventionalization of possessive implicatures. This periphrastic construction is used for alienable possession in MA along with, yet more frequently than, the construct state.

#### 4.2 Why is the emergent construction incompatible with inalienable possession?

According to the principle of iconicity, syntactic structures reflect conceptual perception (Haiman 2008). Thus, while it is normal for alienably possessed nouns to be separated

from the possessor by a functional morpheme, this is not the case with inalienably possessed nouns that are supposed to be closer to the possessor as they express relational or part-to-whole relation. According to Haiman (2008) and Haspelmath (2008a), the inalienable/alienable dichotomy is a clear manifestation of diagrammatic iconicity. That is, correspondence always appears between conceptual distance and syntactic distance. Therefore, cross-linguistically the expression of alienable possession is more complex and requires usage of extra morphemes between the possessee and the possessor, which results in a greater linguistic distance. In inalienable possession, on the other hand, the distance between the possessee and the possessor tends to be kept to the minimum distance possible as a reflection of the speaker's conceptualization of the close relation (relational with kin terms and part-to-whole with body parts) between the two nominals. As a result, inalienable possession usually displays a closer relationship between the possessee and the possessor (McClay 2012). In MA, closeness of the possessee and the possessor is indicated through the restriction on intervening morphemes between the two nominals. Thus, the ungrammaticality of the periphrastic possessive construction with inalienably possessed nouns is a rational consequence of the effect of iconicity.

Another explanation for the incompatibility of the periphrastic possessive construction with inalienable possession has to do with the principles of frequency and economy. According to Nichols (1988), inalienably possessed nouns occur more frequently in possessive constructions than do alienably possessed nouns. That is, it is very common for kinship and body part terms to appear as possessed nouns. Thus, inalienably possessed nouns are perceived of as being always possessed, but this is not the case with alienably possessed nouns, which are perceived of as unpossessed nouns. Consequently, the predictability of nominals of the inalienable category as possessee is higher than that of nominals of the alienable category and upon appearing in a routinized juxtaposed construction, alienably possessed nouns require an overt marker to specify their possessive relation to the other nominal, the possessor. However, upon hearing a typical inalienably possessed noun, speakers can predict that it will occur as a possessee in a possessive construction which renders the overt marking relatively redundant (see Haspelmath 2008b). As languages are efficient systems that activate the principle of economy and place restrictions on redundancy, the ban on the overt possessive marker *ħag* in inalienable possessive constructions in MA is evidently justified.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper discusses the emergence of the alienability distinction in MA through the grammaticalization of the possessive exponent *ħag* out of the lexical word meaning 'right'. The grammaticalization of *ħag* is considered with reference to the principles and mechanisms of grammaticalization, namely layering, divergence, specialization, persistence, decategorialization, extension, and desemanticization, as specified by Hopper (1991, 1996) and Kuteva et al. (2019), respectively. Moreover, the alienability split in MA is explained considering the principles of expressivity, routinization, renewal, and pragmatic inferencing, and the limitation of the analytic possessive construction to alienable possession is justified based on iconicity and economy.

The cline of grammaticalization discussed here, the tendency to develop an analytic possessive construction, is not specific to MA. It is a pervasive phenomenon in almost all modern dialects of Arabic since its motivating factor, to specify the possessive relation, applies equally to all varieties of Arabic (see Dahl and Koptjevskaja-Tamm 1998, Boumans 2006, Brustad 2000, Alshehri 2023). The major difference between the various dialects of Arabic lies in the source and nature of the possessive exponents which are generally derived from words meaning ‘wealth’ or ‘property’ (see Brustad 2000, Rubin 2004, Soltan 2007, Stolz 2011, Al-Salman 2013, among others cited in this paper). It is worth stating that the possessive exponent *ħag* is used in Kuwaiti (Brustad 2000), Najdi (Alrasheedi 2019), Hijazi (Eifan 2017), Emirati, Omani, Sudanese, and Yamani Arabic (Jarad 2017) with some variation in its use from one dialect to another. Although some studies have referred to the analytic possessive construction with the functional morpheme *ħag*, no study has thoroughly discussed the pathway of the grammaticalization of this morpheme and the principles that have motivated its emergence as a possessive genitive exponent indicating the alienability split in Arabic, which is the main contribution of this paper.

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