EXISTENCE AND POSSESSION IN BISA

John Hutchison argues [1980] that what have been considered as several different homophonous particles in Kanuri should be rather analysed as a single morpheme, an associative postposition. Part of the argumentation is designed "to show how a single morpheme...could carry out all the functions" (p.350) involved, in order to help justify the "proposed unity of the seemingly incongruous spectrum of functions" (p.351). One group of these functions involves the predication of existence (in the universe, or at a specific time and place) upon a single nominal argument, or predication of the possession or characterization of one argument by another. While this section of Hutchison's paper (3.1, pp. 325ff) may not be the most controversial part of his proposals, it might be of interest to consider the linking of these particular functions, though expressed by different grammatical means, in Bisa.

Bisa is a language of the southeastern subgroup of Mande [Prost 1953] spoken in Upper Volta and northeastern Ghana. It has a considerable number of verb-less clauses, both in terms of types and in terms of tokens in running text (some 20% in my sample; cf. Naden [1970:106]). These express identification, classification/role, location:

(1) Identification
   Gi n
   'It's a dog'
   dog copula-particle

(2) Classification/Role
   a) Maa gaas ibi n
      You are my
      I friend thou cop-pt.   friend'
   b) Ti kya aw n
      He is a teacher'
      teacher he cop-pt.

(3) Location
   Ibi Fransi-w so
   thou France -in also
   'You, too, are in French territory'

There is also, however, a very frequently used pair of existential/locative verbs ta 'to exist, be in...' and ba 'not to exist, not to be in...'. These are almost invariably followed by the clitic postposition/adverb of location, which is -w following a vowel (as in (3) above), and -o following a consonant. With ba, which is intrinsically negative, there appears the clause-final negative particle -y (-i). Basic usage of these items can be seen in the common greetings (see also Naden [1980]):
These verbs may predicate absolute existence ('in the universe'), as clearly in the oft-heard fatalistic formula:

(6) Wusu ta - w
    God exist-in
    'God exists'

They may also predicate localized or available existence:

(7) Fobile ba - w-i
    food not exist-in-neg
    'There is no food (here, at the moment)'

The verbs are often also used with a locative adjunct to predicate existence or location in a particular place:

(8) Gwaa ta naa - w
    man exist this-at
    'There's a man here'

(9) A ba naa - w-i
    he not exist this-at-neg
    'He isn't here'

(10) A ta m par - o
    he exist I house-at
    'He is at my house'

Possession is expressed by predicating the existence of a NP with the possessor as pre-posed associative modifier:

(11) Móó lu ta - w
    I wife exist-in
    (or 'My wife is here/is alive')
    cf. Móó lu bor naa - w
    I wife came this-at
    'My wife came here'

(12) A fo - si ba - w-i
    his thing-any not exist-in-neg
    'He has nothing'

The choice of 'possessed' NPs of other semantic classes yields a number of other meanings equally exemplified in Hutchison's Kanuri examples:

(13) A gwii ta-w
    'It is heavy' (gwii 'weight')
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(14) Ṣōọ ọọ taw ọọ 'I am hungry' (ọọ 'belly')

(15) A gweli taw 'She is pretty' (gweli 'beauty')

The associative pronoun can be deleted if it is adequately determined by discourse or pragmatic context:

(16) Nyintim ba-w-ọ 'I (you/he/she... ) have insomnia' (nyintim 'sleep')

(17) Pọọ taw ọọ 'He (it/you...) is strong' (pọọ 'strength')

The postposition/adverbial relator particles in Bisa collocate with verbs in a way very comparable with the English 'phrasal verb' patterns. The basic argument order is S-(O)-V-(R) where R is a relator phrase functioning as indirect object, the exact semantic status of this constituent depending on the verb selected and on the obligatory or optional co-presence of the direct (pre-verb) object. These structures furnish an alternative way to use the existential verb to predicate possession (this form is only used in the positive): the possessor is subject of the clause and the possessed is in the R place (ta and ba are never found with pre-verb DO)—a reversal of the more common approach of which the classic example is the Latin est mihi 'there is unto me' possessive:

(18) A taw busoo n guta 'He has lots of money'

In my data, this form is the normal one (and is largely restricted to cases) where something additional follows the basic core of the clause, like the guta of (18) which is equally analyzable as an adverb modifying the whole predicate or as a heavy-shifted modifier from the R constituent ( busoo guta 'much money').

Finally, there is a small group of verbs with a S-(O)-V-(R)-C frame where C is a complement predicated upon the subject: 'become' and 'make into' are the sort of concepts involved. This frame is used by ta in one common construction where a dummy 'it' is the subject, the complement is an experience, and the experiencer is at R:

1I use the term 'heavy shift' in this and related cases because the adjective (or numeral, relative, quantifier, second part of coordination) normally follows the Noun Head of the NP which is Subject or Topic (or, in some cases, Object; Clause order is invariably SOV) but is moved to the right so as to follow the predicate, so normally to clause-final position—i.e. complex NPs in leftward positions tend to be split so that the modifiers can be end-shifted.
(19) A ta moom nyinta 'I'm happy'
it exist me for sweet

Thus in Bisa, as in Kanuri, we see a link between the expression of exist­
tential, possessive, and characterizing/experiential predicates. That this is
by no means inevitable may be seen by considering the Gur languages by which
Bisa is surrounded (Mooré, Gurma, Kusaal, Mampruli) which have a verb for 'to
have' which takes a straight direct object of the thing possessed and contrasts
lexically with the existential/locative verb which parallels many of the other
functions of Bisa ta/ba . The Bisa 'my...exists' seems to be a fairly unusual
way of expressing possession.

REFERENCES


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