

EXISTENCE AND POSSESSION IN BISA

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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:

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|-------------------------|----|---|-------------------------------------|
| (1) Identification | | Gi n
dog copula-particle | 'It's a dog' |
| (2) Classification/Role | a) | Moo gaasiba ibii n
I friend thou cop-pt. | 'You are my friend' |
| | b) | Tiikya awo n
teacher he cop-pt. | 'He is a teacher' |
| (3) Location | | lbii Fransii-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]):

- (4) A: Laafi ta -w ge? B: Laafi ta -w
 health exist-in eh health exist-in
 'Are you well?' 'Yes'
- (5) A: Mii -si ba - w-i ge? B: Mii -si ba - w-i
 trouble-any not exist-in-neg eh trouble-any not exist-in-neg
 'No trouble?' 'No trouble'

These verbs may predicate absolute existence ('in the universe'), as clearly in the oft-heard fatalistic formula:

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

They may also predicate localized or available existence:

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

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

- (8) Gwaa ta naa -w 'There's a man here'
 man exist this-at
- (9) A ba naa - w-i 'He isn't here'
 he not exist this-at-neg
- (10) A ta m par -o 'He is at my house'
 he exist I house-at

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

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

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

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

- (13) A gwili ta-w 'It is heavy' (gwili 'weight')

(14) Mɔɔ nɔ ʔa-w 'I am hungry' (nɔ 'belly')

(15) A gweli ʔa-w 'She is pretty' (gweli 'beauty')

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

(16) Nyintiim ba-w-i 'I (you/he/she...) have insomnia'
(nyintiim 'sleep')

(17) Paŋa ʔa-w 'He (it/you...) is strong' (paŋa '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 (ʔa 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 ʔa busoo n guʔa 'He has lots of money'
he exist money with big

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 *guʔa* of (18) which is equally analysable as an adverb modifying the whole predicate or as a heavy-shifted modifier from the R constituent (*busoo guʔa* 'much money').¹

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 ʔa 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 mo ma nyinta 'I'm happy'
 it exist me for sweet

Thus in Bisa, as in Kanuri, we see a link between the expression of existential, 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.

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