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The Expression of Possession in the al-ʿAwābī District (Northern Oman)

ABSTRACT Arabic dialects show different ways of expressing possession and ownership. Generally, two main constructions are used: the construct phrase (or synthetic genitive, known in Arabic as *iḏāfa*), that links together two nouns in a relationship of possessor and possessed, and the analytic genitive, which uses genitive exponents to express possession or relationship between two nouns.

Eksell Harning's work (1980) is an extensive comparative study of possessive linkers in many different Arabic dialects. However, the sources the author used for Oman were Reinhardt (1894) for the northern part of the country, and Rhodokanakis (1908) for Dhofar (south Oman). More recent studies, including the one by Davey (2016) on Dhofari Arabic, show different behaviour of genitive exponents in both areas. In the al-ʿAwābī district (northern Oman), two main genitive exponents are used, namely *māl* and *ḥāl*, indicating two different types of genitive relations.

In this paper, I will outline the syntactic use and occurrence of the analytic genitive compared to the synthetic one in the vernacular of the al-ʿAwābī district, which appear to be different from Reinhardt's study (1894) and from other Omani varieties. The analysis presented here takes into consideration a cross-dialectal approach and uses data that have been collected during three months of fieldwork in the area, through free speech recordings and direct questions to informants.

KEYWORDS Omani Arabic, Arabic dialectology, syntax, possessive constructions, field research

1 Introduction

When talking about Omani Arabic, two main works come to mind, i.e. Reinhardt's *Ein arabischer Dialekt gesprochen in 'Omān und Zanzibar* (1894) and Rhodokanakis' *Der vulgärarabische Dialekt im Ḍofār (Zfār). I: Prosaische und poetische Texte, Übersetzung und Indices* (1908). These works, published at the beginning of the last century, had

been the only sources available on Omani Arabic for a long time, at least until the 1980s when researchers could once again approach the Sultanate.

We cannot forget, however, that Omani Arabic is not a single linguistic entity but rather contains many different varieties, some of which still need to be unveiled. Reinhardt's (1894) work describes the phonology, morphology and—partially—syntax of the Banū Kharūṣī dialect spoken in the area which today belongs to the district of al-ṢAwābī in northern Oman. His account is not completely reliable due to the lack of supporting data, and more recent works (i.e. Bettega 2019; Morano, Forthcoming) have demonstrated that a consistent part of his original materials are no longer valid today. This is especially true when talking about genitive markers.

This paper examines the use of synthetic genitive and analytic genitive constructions in the dialect spoken by the al-Kharūṣī and al-ṢAbri tribes in the district of al-ṢAwābī in northern Oman. The aim is to show the syntactic and pragmatic functions which the markers *māl* and *ḥāl* convey in the data collected from native speakers in the district. The analysis will also concern the comparison with Reinhardt's (1894) materials on this matter and will prove that only one of these markers (i.e. *māl*) really expresses a genitive relation, whereas *ḥāl* conveys a different function.

After a brief presentation of the data and the methodology used to gather them, the paper looks at the ways of expressing possession in the Arabian Peninsula. It then introduces a discussion on the two constructions usually adopted by modern Arabic dialects to express ownership and possession, i.e. the synthetic genitive—also known in Arabic as *iḍāfa*—and the analytic genitive, which entails the use of genitive markers. The paper will then analyse the specific functions conveyed by the markers *māl* and *ḥāl* in the dialect under investigation, demonstrating that the latter cannot be included in the list of genitive markers at least for the al-ṢAwābī district.

2 The data

The material for the present article was obtained during two fieldwork trips made in February–April 2017 and June 2018 and are part of a larger PhD project. The data were collected in the district of al-ṢAwābī, which consists of al-ṢAwābī town and Wādī Banī Kharūṣ—a strip of villages that goes 26 km long deep into al-Hajar mountains. The two places differ significantly in terms of lifestyle: the town hosts a younger population, many of whom had access to higher education and work either in Muscat or in Rustaq; the wadi, on the contrary, is inhabited by older people—on average 60+—who live on farming (dates) and breeding (goats). Therefore, the participants varied from younger literate speakers in al-ṢAwābī town to illiterate elders in Wādī Banī Kharūṣ.

Table 1 shows a detailed list of the participants used for this study.

In the selection of participants, three main criteria were considered: the provenance (i.e. either al-ṢAwābī town or Wādī Banī Kharūṣ); the level of education

TABLE 1. Metadata relative to the native speakers involved in the documentation process of the Arabic vernacular spoken in the district of al-ṢAwābī, in northern Oman.

| Speaker | Gender | Age | Origin | Level of education | Tribe |
|---------|--------|-------|------------------|--------------------|------------|
| 1 | F | 58 | al-ṢAwābī | illiterate | al-Kharūṣī |
| 2 | F | 45 | Wādī Banī Kharūṣ | illiterate | al-Kharūṣī |
| 4 | F | 60–70 | Wādī Banī Kharūṣ | illiterate | al-ṢAbrī |
| 6 | F | 38 | al-ṢAwābī | university | al-Kharūṣī |
| 7 | F | 44 | al-ṢAwābī | middle school | al-Kharūṣī |
| 8 | M | 65–75 | Wādī Banī Kharūṣ | illiterate | al-ṢAbrī |
| 10 | F | 55 | al-ṢAwābī | middle school | al-Kharūṣī |
| 13 | M | 85–95 | Wādī Banī Kharūṣ | illiterate | al-Kharūṣī |
| 15 | F | 80–90 | al-ṢAwābī | illiterate | al-ṢAbrī |

(i.e. from illiterate, with no access to schooling, to higher education); and age. The latter criterion was further divided into three groups: youth (i.e. 25–40), middle aged (i.e. 41–60), and elderly (i.e. 60+). These criteria were chosen in order to better illustrate the diachronic changes that occurred in the district since Reinhardt (1894). Moreover, as Table 1 displays, the data must be considered, with only two exceptions, to be based on women’s speech, since accessing men was difficult for the author and the male data collected are not enough to expand this investigation to the gender variable.

The material presented in this paper was either elicited with native speakers or extrapolated from free speech recordings. The recordings have been then transcribed with the help of a native speaker of the same dialect under investigation in this paper. The examples reported throughout this article are glossed following the speaker’s number as given in Table 1.

3 Expression of possession in Modern Arabic dialects

Modern Arabic dialects show different ways of expressing possession and ownership, which Payne (1997: 104) calls ‘possessive constructions.’ In Arabic, as in other world languages, however, these structures are not used only to express a relationship of possession, as we will see in the course of this paper.¹ Possession can be expressed through two main constructions, namely the synthetic genitive construction (henceforth, SGC)—also known as *iḍāfa*—, which links together possessor and possessed directly, and the analytic genitive construction (henceforth, AGC), which involves the use of so-called genitive exponents.

1 Payne (1997: 126) also distinguishes ‘possessive noun phrases’ and ‘possessive clauses’: the first ‘contains two elements, a possessor and a possessed item’ (e.g.), whereas the second can occasionally present the verb ‘to have,’ or, more commonly, ‘a copular verb or particle’ (Payne 1997: 126).

Each Arabic dialect displays its own genitive exponents, which is always the result of a process of grammaticalisation of either a noun meaning ‘property’ or ‘thing’ or of a relative pronoun (cf. Rubin 2004: 328; Eksell Harning 1980: 19). The structure of a sentence with a genitive exponent is the following:

Noun (N) + Genitive Marker (GEN) + Modifier (MD).

The noun is always a substantive, whereas the modifier can be another substantive or a personal pronoun. In most cases—and in the data presented in this paper—the modifier is definite; however, it is also possible—although more rarely—to have an indefinite modifier following a genitive marker. Bettega (2019: 230) reported a few examples from his informants in Oman, which also show how the definiteness or indefiniteness of the modifier impacts on the semantics of the whole construction. In the examples reported in this paper, gathered in the district of al-Ṣawābī, the modifier is always definite and in no instances has it been possible to detect this semantic difference.

Eksell Harning’s work (1980) is an extensive comparative study of possessive linkers in many different Arabic dialects, although her work does not deal with the historical developments of these linkers. Moreover, with regards to Omani Arabic—which this paper deals with—her sources were only Reinhardt (1894) for north Oman, and Rhodokanakis (1908) for south Oman.²

More recent studies, however, show that Omani Arabic employs markers to convey various types of relationship, and not just a genitive one. These markers are also more widespread and common in the everyday speech than originally described by Reinhardt (1894) or Rhodokanakis (1908).

4 Genitive exponents in the Arabic dialects of the Arabian Peninsula

In the Arabian Peninsula, Arabic dialects show different trends when it comes to the use of genitive exponents in the AGC. According to Eksell Harning (1980: 69), the sedentary western dialects of the Peninsula (i.e. Yemeni, Hijazi and Hadramawti) ‘use the AG [Analytic Genitive] regularly and they all share the same exponents.’ On the contrary, the sedentary eastern dialects of the Peninsula (i.e. Omani, Gulf and Dhofari) show a more restricted use of the AG.³ As mentioned in the previous section,

² Cf. Eksell Harning (1980: 71).

³ Eksell Harning (1980: 71) states that ‘in Dhofār, the AG seems to be absent. The exponents and occur, but only independently,’ making a reference to Rhodokanakis (1908: 107). This has been proved wrong by Davies (2016), as will be further shown in the course of this paper.

however, this is not completely accurate, since new works on Omani varieties show a more widespread use of the genitive markers and the AGC.

Before analysing the SGC and AGC in the Omani vernacular investigated here, it is worth giving a broader picture of genitive markers employed in the Arabian Peninsula:

- The Persian Gulf: According to Qafisheh (1977: 117), the genitive exponents in Gulf Arabic are *māl* and *ḥagg*, mainly used to avoid the ‘structural ambiguity’ resulting from an SGC where the two elements are of the same gender. Moreover, Qafisheh (1977) states that there is a difference in their use: *ḥagg* is generally used with ‘animate or inanimate nouns’; whilst *māl* only with ‘inanimate nouns,’ especially appliances and spare parts. They are often also employed with nouns of foreign origin (cf. Eksell Harning 1980: 70). They do not seem to inflect in gender and number.
- Bahrain: In the Baḥārna dialects of Bahrain, Holes (2016: 223–227) reports two genitive markers, namely *māl* and *ḥagg*. He notes a slight difference in the use: if both are generally used to express a wide range of genitive relations in all speakers, *ḥagg* is more often used for the relationship of ‘one of part-whole or purpose, and not always in these cases’ (Holes 2016). One difference is, however, that *māl* presents a feminine form *mālat*.
- Yemen: In Ṣanṣānī Arabic, Watson (2009: 112) reports the genitive exponent *ḥagg* only, which does not inflect in gender or number, and whose use can be determined by rhythmic and stylistic factors.

In Oman, three main genitive markers are in use for the Omani varieties so far documented: *ḥaqq*, *māl* and *ḥāl*. These markers are in use in different parts of the countries and with different functions, as will be clear further on in Section 5. Although they are far more widespread than what Eksell Harning (1980) reported, in the data presented here both the SGC and the AGC are employed, with little pragmatic differences.

5 Synthetic genitive construction (SGC)

The SGC ‘consists of a noun in the construct state, immediately followed by a modifier’ (Eksell Harning 1980: 21). The link between the two is made through the definite article (*i*)- depending on the context:

- (1) *bistān* *el-gīrān*
 garden.SG DEF-neighbour.PL
 ‘the garden of the neighbours’ (S 15)

- (2) *maşnaḥ at-tumūr*
 factory.SG DEF-date.PL
 ‘date factory’ (S 2)
- (3) *markaz iṣ-ṣaḥḥa n-nisā*
 centre.SG DEF-health.FSG DEF-woman.FPL
 ‘centre of women’s health’ (S 7)
- (4) *malkat nūr*
 engagement.FSG Nur
 ‘Nur’s engagement’ (S3)

These examples show how the synthetic genitive construction does not exclusively indicate a relationship of possession but also a relationship of generic belonging or characterisation, despite following the same link as other nouns in a possessive construction. This is the case of examples (1) and (4), whereas example (2) provides evidence of a relationship of characterisation or description specifying the type of factory. Lastly, example (3) shows a double construct state. Although in theory there is no limit to the possible coordinated components in a construct state if the juxtaposition is maintained, very long strings of synthetic genitive are almost null in the primary data; strings that count more than three elements are usually interrupted by employing an AG construction.

In the SGC phrase, nothing can come between the noun and the modifier in the construct phrase, except for the definite article or a demonstrative pronoun (e.g. *šaḥar haḍi l-bint* ‘the hair of this girl’). This is because the demonstrative pronoun is considered in apposition⁴ to the lexical item it precedes, and is therefore not counted as cutting the construct phrase.

According to the distinction made by Qafisheh (1977: 118–119) in his study on Gulf Arabic for ordinary noun constructs, in the data it is possible to find the following: alienable possession (such as example 1 above) and inalienable possession (e.g. *yad el-bint* ‘the girl’s hand’); naming (e.g. *madīnat ar-rustāq* ‘the town of Rustāq’), where the first noun is a geographical noun and the second is a proper noun; container-contents (e.g. *fiṅān qahwa* ‘a cup of coffee’ and not ‘a coffee cup’⁵, or example 2 above), where the first is a noun denoting an object and the second is a noun of material;⁶ and

4 A construction consisting of two (or more) adjacents having identical referents.

5 Qafisheh (1977: 119) states that *fiṅān qahwa* is derived from *fiṅān min al-qahwa*.

6 Watson (1993: 183) defines this genitive relation as ‘genitive of description,’ which are usually indefinite: ‘the sense of genitive of description can be rendered attributively by making the modifier a relational () or other adjective.’

material (e.g. *xātim ḍahab* ‘a gold ring’⁷), where the first is a concrete noun and the second is a noun of material. The data collected in the al-ṢAwābī district, however, show that for the latter category the SGC and the AGC can be interchangeable irrespective of age, provenance or level of education of the speaker (e.g. *xātim māḷ ḍahab* ‘a gold ring’).

The SGC is always considered definite, if the second term of the annexation is determined, as in examples (1)–(3), and in the genitive relations of alienable / inalienable possession and naming. However, there are cases when the synthetic genitive is indefinite, such as in the genitive relations of container-content and material. In both cases, the second term of the annexation is not determined.

Another common example of SGC is the relationship of possession expressed through the possessive pronouns. In the data, this construction is mainly used with nouns that have an ‘inherent possession,’ as it is called by Payne (1997: 105). These are usually body parts, kinship and terms referring to personal adornments (e.g. *bint-ī* ‘my daughter’; *yad-iš* ‘your (FSG) hand’; *kumm-o* ‘his Omani hat’).

6 Analytic genitive construction (AGC)

The second type of possessive construction sees the use of genitive exponents (i.e. grammaticalised nouns expressing ‘property’ or ‘ownership’), and it is known as the analytic genitive. Eksell Harning (1980: 10-11) states that ‘modern Arabic dialects show a tendency towards an analytic language structure,’ probably caused by the loss of the case endings and, in some cases, by the reduction of the categories of number and gender. The truth is that the AGC is found throughout the Arabic-speaking world, although different dialects use different genitive exponents with different functions, scopes and limitations. In most of the dialects, both SGC and AGC are used, ‘and the choice between them creates a dynamic process of language development’ (Eksell Harning 1980: 11).

In her comparative study, Eksell Harning (1980: 158) divides Arabic dialects into six groups according to their use of the analytic genitive construction:

- Group I: the AGC is not used; exponents may occur predicatively or as a lexical borrowing.
- Group II: the AGC occurs sporadically; the semantic categories of the AGC cannot be structured, and formal factors are often decisive for the choice of the AGC.

7 Qafisheh (1977: 119) makes it derive from *al-xātim min ḍahab* (‘the ring made of gold’). In a few instances, however, in the district it is possible to use the analytic genitive to express a semantic relationship of qualification, and in particular of material quality (e.g. *xātim māḷ ḍahab*, lit. ‘the ring of gold’).

- Group III: the AGC is well established; the AGC is chosen for formal or stylistic reasons.
- Group IV: the AGC is well established; semantically, the majority of AGCs are found within categories of concrete possession or qualification, in which the AGC is preferred to the synthetic genitive construction.
- Group V: the AGC is very well established; formal and stylistic factors are important for the choice of the AGC, even though there is a tendency to prefer the AGC whenever is semantically possible.
- Group VI: the AGC is the ordinary way of expressing the genitive.

According to this classification, Eksell Harning assigns Omani dialects to the second group. However, as already mentioned, more recent studies show a different behaviour of exponents in both areas.

The Omani dialects for which we have documentation present three main exponents, all derived from nouns expressing possession and ownership in some way: in Dhofar, according to Davey (2016),⁸ *ḥaqq* ('right, entitlement') and *māl* ('property') are of common occurrence, with no difference in the use or function; a third type is *ḥāl* ('state'), reported also by Reinhardt (1894) and of common occurrence in my data. Reinhardt (1894: 79) states that *ḥāl* and *māl* are 'häufig'—'of common occurrence'—, however they rarely appear in the texts reported at the end of his work. He also adds other grammaticalised terms used as genitive exponents, such as the active participles *rāy/rāyāt* ('seeing'), *ṣāḥib* ('owner') and *bū* (< **abū* 'father'). The latter is also used as a relative pronoun in the dialect of the al-ʿAwābī district. With the only exceptions of *ḥāl* and *māl*, and in some cases of *bū*, none of the other genitive exponents reported by Reinhardt (1894) have been found in use in the speech of my informants.

Based on the data I collected in the al-ʿAwābī district, the most common genitive exponents used are indeed *ḥāl* and *māl*. However, only *māl* can be defined as genitive exponent, because, as will be shown further in this section, *ḥāl* is instead used mainly as a preposition and conveys a completely different type of relation.

In contrast with the genitive exponents in Dhofari Arabic, *ḥāl* and *māl* are indeclinable forms, which means that they do not agree in gender and number with the noun they refer to, acting merely as linkers between the possessed and the possessor.

The possessive phrase with a genitive exponent usually follows this construction: N + *māl/ḥāl* + MD, e.g. *dišdaša māl ar-riggāl* 'a man's dishdasha'; *ḥadiya ḥāl nūr* 'a gift for Nur'. The modifier, as in the case of the SGC, can be another noun, a participle, an adjective, a numeral or an infinitive, and it is usually definite. Examples with an

8 Davey (2016: 228), taking into consideration that Eksell Harning's work uses Rhodokanakis (1908, 1911) as a source for Dhofari Arabic, states: 'the current data in this study does indeed reveal that the AGC is far more common in CDA [coastal Dhofari Arabic] than was previously thought, and can express a variety of different possessive relationship.'

indefinite modifier are rare in the data collected, but they can be found, for example, in the categories of material (e.g. *ḥigāb māl ḥarīr* ‘a silk hijab’) and of non possessive qualification (e.g. example 7 below).⁹

In these cases—although quite rare in the primary data—the exponent does not convey a relationship of possession, but rather a description or qualification.

Similarly, this type of relationship is conveyed by the genitive marker *māl* in expressions of professions and specialisation, e.g. *duktur māl wasm* ‘doctor of traditional medicine’, *profesūr māl l-adab il-ingrīziya* ‘professor of English literature.’

Brustad (2000: 71) states that ‘constructions involving the exponents often convey specific pragmatic information that the construct phrase does not,’ and she individuates formal and pragmatic motivations in the choice of using or not the genitive exponent. Among the formal motivations, Brustad (2000: 74) considers ‘multi-term annexation (three or more nouns), the presence of modifying adjectives and parallel phrases with more than one head noun.’

In the data, *māl* can indeed be used to cut the line of coordinated items in a construct phrase, as in

- (5) *maktab al-qabūl māl el-madrasa*
 office.SG DEF-admission.SG GEN DEF-school.FSG
 ‘the admission office of the school’ (S 8)

Furthermore, the genitive exponent is preferred with foreign loanwords:

- (6) *instagram māl-iš*
 instagram GEN-PRON.2FSG
 ‘your Instagram profile’ (S 6)
- (7) *raqm-o māl whatsapp*
 number.SG-PRON.3MSG GEN whatsapp
 ‘his WhatsApp number’ (S 10)

and nouns ending with a long vowel:

- (8) *kursī māl-i*
 sofa.SG GEN-PRON.1SG
 ‘my sofa’ (S 7)

9 Bettega (2019: 230) reports one example from his informants, asked to disambiguate between a definite and an indefinite modifier in the following sentence: *qašʿa māl dxūn* (‘a jar of frankincense’) and *qašʿa māl ad-dxūn* (‘a jar for frankincense’).

- (9) *gūṭī* *māl-iš*
 shoe.SG GEN-PRON.2FSG
 ‘your shoe’ (S 15)

Words of foreign origin may or may not take the genitive marker: nouns like *tilifūn* (‘telephone’) or *tītūn* (‘toddler’) seem to prefer a synthetic genitive construction (e.g. *tilifūn-iš* ‘your (FSG) phone’, *tītūn-he* ‘her toddler’¹⁰). A possible explanation is that they are treated by the speaker as inalienable possessions and behave syntactically as such.

Among the pragmatic functions of the genitive exponent, Brustad (2000: 76, italics in the text) argues that ‘the genitive exponents fulfil specific functions that the construct phrase does not,’ and particularly, ‘the exponent places a focus on the *possessing* noun not conveyed by the construct phrase.’ This statement can explain the simultaneous use of the construct state and the genitive exponent found in the data. Thus, for example, a phrase like *kitāb el-bint* (‘the book of the girl’) can be replaced by *kitāb māl el-bint*, with no apparent difference in meaning, but a difference in function: *māl* emphasises the possessor, in this case the girl (*bint*).

This exchange in the constructions for expressing possession is valid for almost every kind of relation, except for terms having inherent possessive value, such as parts of the body and kinship (thus, it is not possible to find in the vernacular under investigation phrases like **umm māl-o* ‘his mother,’ but always *umm-o*; or like **yad māl-iš* ‘your (FSG) hand,’ but always *yad-iš*).

The exponent *ḥāl*, on the contrary, conveys a different function when compared to *māl*. As I will demonstrate in the following subsection in accordance with the data collected, *ḥāl* cannot be considered a genitive exponent, but rather it is a preposition.¹¹ If *māl* is used mainly to express a genitive relation of belonging, *ḥāl* is used in contexts that indicate a beneficial relation: in all the examples found in the data, *ḥāl* expresses a benefit for the modifier (the second item of the annexation, as stated above) and what in English translates as ‘for, to.’

- (10) *xādo* *awlād* *ṯamm-ha* *šey*
 take.PAST.3MPL child.MPL uncle-PRON.3FSG something
w-bāqit *ḥāl-he*
 CONJ.-remain.AP.MSG GEN-PRON.3FSG
 ‘her cousins took something, and the remaining was for her’ (S 1)

10 *tītūn* is a Swahili loanword. It comes from the root *toto* which indicates anything that is ‘small.’

11 Davey (2016: 230) reports some examples where the genitive exponents *māl* and *ḥaqq* appear to be interchangeable, ‘with no resulting change in meaning.’ This does not seem to be possible in the speech of my informants in any case, since *māl* and *ḥāl* convey two distinct functions in the data.

- (11) *haḏī* *l-haḏīya* *ḥāl-iš*
 DEM.PROX.FSG DEF-present.FSG GEN-PRON.2FSG
 ‘this gift is for you’ (S 7)
- (12) *haḏēlā* *l-mšākik* *ḥāl* *al-gīrān*
 DEM.PROX.FPL DEF-skewer.PL GEN DEF-neighbour.PL
 ‘these skewers are for the neighbours’ (S 13)

In example (10), the speaker is talking about the division of an inheritance, and *ḥāl* expresses a beneficial value for the modifier (in this case represented by the possessive pronoun *-he*, ‘her’). In (12), the speaker is referring to the skewers that are traditionally brought to neighbours and relatives on the second day of Eid celebrations, thus we can presume that again *ḥāl* is intended as a beneficial relationship.

Consider the following examples which show how *māl* and *ḥāl* are not interchangeable in my informants’ speech:

- (a) هذا الكتاب مال البنت
haḏā *l-kitāb* *māl* *il-bint*
 DEM.PROX.MSG DEF-book.SG GEN DEF-girl.FSG
 ‘this book belongs to the girl’
- (b) هذا الكتاب حال البنت
haḏā *l-kitāb* *ḥāl* *il-bint*
 DEM.PROX.MSG DEF-book.SG PREP DEF-girl.FSG
 ‘this book is for the girl’

These sentences were elicited from all the informants involved in this study. In all cases, regardless of age, provenance or level of education, the speakers clearly used the two different constructions to convey the two different functions. The same difference is found by Bettega (2019), who states that *ḥāl* expresses a dative case in his data, thus being a marker of clausal relation rather than genitive. As far as the data in this study are concerned, *ḥāl* can be considered as a preposition and not a genitive marker, also confuting Reinhardt’s position.¹²

12 ‘Dass das Genitiv-Verhältniss häufig durch die Wörter *māl* Besitz und *ḥāl* Zustand, mit Beibehaltung des Artikels umschrieben wird’ (Reinhardt 1894: 79).

7 Relative pronoun *bū* used as a genitive exponent

A third, more rarely used, genitive linker is *bū* (< **abū* ‘father’) also used as relative pronoun in the speech of my informants. In the data collected, there are only two examples showing *bū* in its genitive functions, and these are more often used by young speakers:

- (13) *asmaʕ* *eṣ-ṣawt* *bū* *mmi-nā*¹³
 hear.PRES.1SG DEF-voice.SG GEN mother-PRON.1PL
 ‘I hear our mum’s voice’ (S 6)

- (14) *es-siyyāra* *bū* *aḥmad*
 DEF-car.FSG GEN aḥmad
 ‘Aḥmad’s car’ (S 7)

Unfortunately, the examples are not enough to postulate any theory on the use of *bū* as a genitive exponent, and further research is needed.

The use of a grammaticalised form of a relative pronouns as genitive markers is not new to modern Arabic dialects and Semitic languages in general. Rubin (2004: 328) reports examples from Akkadian, Ge’ez, Biblical Aramaic and Mehri. Modern Arabic dialects, however, employ more often a grammaticalised noun meaning ‘property’ or ‘thing,’ as detailed so far.

8 Conclusions

Eksell Harning (1980: 160) offers two main criteria to detect how and when the AGC is preferred to the SGC: one is geographical, ‘in the western region, the AGC tends to be the ordinary way of expressing genitive,’ whereas ‘in the east, the AG is a more or less extensively used complement to the SG’ (synthetic genitive); the second criterion is socio-cultural, since ‘the AG is most extensively used in the *madani* dialects,’ less in the rural dialects and almost completely absent in Bedouin dialects. The reason lies in the major heterogeneity of urban environments compared to rural realities.¹⁴ These statements are not entirely applicable to the vernacular as presented here, since in the speech of my informants, the AGC is very productive as it is also in other neighbouring dialects, and it is not always used as a complement to the synthetic genitive but rather it expresses different genitive relations based on pragmatic and functional factors. The examples provided in this article have shown that if, on the one hand,

13 *mmi-nā* (lit. ‘our mother’) is the informal way children use to call their mother.

14 Eksell Harning (1980: 164–165).

the SGC is almost compulsory for certain type of genitive relation (e.g. inalienable possession), on the other hand, the AGC is preferred in the relations of description and content. Furthermore, we saw how in some cases the AGC and the SGC are interchangeable, as in the case of alienable possession.

No difference has been found in the use of the analytic or the synthetic construction in respect of age, gender or level of education of the speakers involved. Moreover, no difference has been found in respect of the different geographical areas that form the al-ṢAwābī district (i.e. Wādī Banī Kharūṣ and neighbouring villages). It seems, however, that Reinhardt (1894) was right in stating that the exponents *māl* and *ḥāl* were 'häufig' in the speech of his informants, despite not providing enough examples neither in the grammar nor in the texts at the end of his work.

It would be desirable for more research to be devoted to the use of exponents in Omani Arabic, expanding the investigation to other varieties spoken in areas of Oman still linguistically unexplored.

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