

Imagine no possession: John Lennon in the construct state

Gabi Danon, Bar-Ilan University

The Hebrew Construct State (CS) is a preposition-less genitive construction where the lexical head is immediately followed by an embedded nominal. Among many poorly understood facts about this construction is the observation that proper names (PNs) are often ungrammatical in the embedded position (Rothstein 2012). Thus, **xatul sara* (lit. cat Sara) is ungrammatical and cannot mean ‘Sara’s cat’. This is not only unexpected syntactically (as the embedded position in a CS is an environment in which DPs are licensed), but it also poses a problem to the many semantic analyses which argued that a CS is interpreted as a function that applies to individual-denoting nominals (Heller 2002, Dobrovie-Sorin 2003, Doron & Meir 2013). Our goal is to provide a descriptively adequate characterization of this constraint and a possible explanation, where the (apparent) ban on PNs is a side effect of the loss of productivity of possessive CS.

We start by noting a serious methodological problem underlying the study of the CS. CS acceptability is highly sensitive to register, and many instances of the CS might be judged as acceptable in formal, literary or archaic Hebrew but not in informal MH. Our focus is on contemporary productive MH, and a crucial observation in this context is that in informal use, some subtypes of CS are avoided but others are not. It is this fact that we take as our starting point: in contrast to possessive CS, which is mostly restricted to very high register use, the subtype of CS characterized by Borer (2008) as modificational CS is in fact extremely productive across registers. In modificational CS, the embedded nominal is interpreted as a non-referential modifier of the head: e.g., *mic agvanyot* ‘tomato juice’ (lit. juice tomatoes) or *texnay tanurim* ‘oven technician’ (lit. technician ovens). Borer shows that while these share many similarities to N-N compounds, they are nevertheless instances of fully productive and compositional CS. In this type of CS, the embedded nominal is non-referential, and hence the CS is interpreted not as a function or relation but as a head+modifier. The high productivity of these in contemporary MH casts doubts on the view that the CS is inherently relational, and suggests a simple hypothesis regarding the ban on PNs, according to which only modificational constructs are productive and hence PNs are blocked simply because they cannot be modifiers; see Rothstein (2012) for an analysis that pursues a similar idea. Support for this hypothesis comes from the fact that if a PN *can* be understood as a modifier, it is perfectly acceptable in a CS: *miškafey John Lennon* ‘J.L. eyeglasses’, *tisrocket elvis* ‘Elvis haircut’ etc. Similarly, while a CS like *melon sara* (lit. hotel Sara) is ungrammatical under the possessive interpretation (‘Sara’s hotel’), it is grammatical under the modificational/appositive reading where *Sara* is the name of the hotel.

One immediate objection to this analysis, however, is that it implies not only that the embedded nominal in a CS *can* be a modifier, but rather that it *must*; hence, this would rule out the kind of interpretation usually assumed to be the most characteristic of a CS, where the lexical head maps an individual denoted by the embedded nominal to another individual (but see Rothstein 2012 for an alternative semantics that aims to solve this problem). This includes, for instance, possessives as in *xulcat ha-yeled* ‘the boy’s shirt’, as well as lexically specified relations as in *kce ha-rexov* ‘the end of the street’. Lexically relational nouns, as well as argument-taking nominalizations, do in fact seem to be far more acceptable in CS than other nouns: for instance, *haxrazat ha-sar* ‘the minister’s announcement’ is judged as better than *??/*bdixat ha-yeled* ‘the boy’s joke’. We thus argue that it is possession, but not lexical relations, that no longer exists as a productive option in the CS. However, three factors conspire to obscure this pattern: lexical storage of semi-open templates; ‘borrowings’ from

high register or archaic Hebrew; and definiteness spreading. Lexical storage is the fact that some Ns are more productive than others as CS heads in a way that doesn't seem to follow any systematic pattern. Hence, even closely related nouns may differ in their acceptability as heads of CS; e.g., *tmunat ha-kise* 'the picture of the chair' vs. *??/*ciyur ha-kise* 'the painting of the chair'. This is highly correlated with the second factor: Acceptability of a CS increases sharply with head nouns that are frequent in newspapers, TV, familiar literary or historical sources, etc. Both factors are expected if non-modificational CS is only semi-productive, hence sensitive to lexical storage effects.

Definiteness spreading (Borer 1999, Dobrovie-Sorin 2003, Danon 2008), is the phenomenon where definiteness marking on the embedded XP 'spreads' to the entire CS, such that e.g. *sof ha-seret* (lit. end the-movie) is interpreted as 'the end of the movie' despite the lack of a definite article on *sof*. As argued in Danon (2008), when the embedded XP is marked [def], this is sometimes interpreted *only* at the CS level. This is clearly true for modificational CS: *texnay ha-tanurim* 'the oven technician' (lit. technician the-ovens) does not presuppose uniqueness, maximality or familiarity of the ovens. In many other cases, however, it is not immediately obvious whether [def] is interpreted on the embedded nominal. While *xulcat ha-yalda* (lit. shirt the-girl) might be analyzed as the possessive '[the girl]'s shirt', it might also mean 'the [girls' shirt]' (=the shirt for girls); the question is thus whether it can be shown that definite CSs that are non-lexicalized, non-'borrowed', and involve a referential genitive DP are indeed productive in spontaneous use. Evidence that they are not comes from the fact that novel possessive CSs that are unlikely to be stored are judged as ungrammatical: **mikledet ha-xatul* (lit. keyboard the-cat), **kumkum ha-axot* (lit. kettle the-nurse), **limoney ha-tinok* (lit. lemons the-baby) etc. Thus, while we agree with Heller (2002) that the CS can denote lexical relations, we claim that possession does not pattern with relational nouns and is no longer productive in the CS in contemporary MH.

Finally, we provide evidence from a large corpus of Wikipedia entries that shows that even in formal (but nevertheless productive) use, the ratio of CS to total genitives is much lower with PNs than with common nouns, especially with human-denoting PNs (where possession is potentially involved). Nevertheless, CS with human PNs is surprisingly common, but informal inspection of the corpus data shows that such constructs rarely denote possession.

In conclusion, while possession is often seen as the prototypical relation encoded in genitive constructions, the MH CS seems to be evolving into a non-possessive genitive, while possession is increasingly restricted to the other two types of MH genitives: *šel*-genitives (e.g., *ha-xatul šel sara*, lit. 'the-cat of Sara') and double genitives (e.g., *xatul-a šel sara*, lit. 'cat-POSS.F.S of Sara').

References

- Borer, H., 1999. Deconstructing the construct. In K. Johnson & I. Roberts (eds.), *Beyond Principles and Parameters*, 43-89. Springer.
- Borer, H., 2008. Compounds: the view from Hebrew. In R. Lieber & P. Stekauer (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Compounds*, 491-511. Oxford University Press.
- Danon, G., 2008. Definiteness spreading in the Hebrew construct state. *Lingua* 118: 872-906.
- Dobrovie-Sorin, C., 2003. From DPs to NPs. In M. Coene & Y. D'hulst (eds.), *From NP to DP: The expression of possession in noun phrases*, 75-120. John Benjamins.
- Doron, E. and Meir, I., 2013. Amount definites. *Recherches linguistiques de Vincennes* 42:139-165.
- Heller, D., 2002. Possession as a lexical relation: evidence from the Hebrew Construct State. In *WCCFL 21 Proceedings*, 127-140. Cascadilla Press.
- Rothstein, S., 2012. Reconsidering the Hebrew construct state. *Italian Journal of Linguistics* 24(2): 227-266.