Variation in the expression of possession in Arabic: the role of language contact

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Expression of possession is an area where it is not uncommon to see cross-linguistic influence. Weinreich (1963) mentions the cases of Estonian, Amharic, and Modern Hebrew which developed or increased the use of analytic possessive constructions as a result of contact with other languages. Hickey (2010) makes an argument for the role of Celtic languages in the change in Middle English towards the use of possessive pronouns with inalienable nouns instead of the old Germanic form that marked this type of possession through use of the personal dative.

In this presentation I discuss the role of language contact in the variation in the expression of attributive possession in Tunisian Arabic. In addition to the construct state and synthetic constructions, in Tunisian Arabic attributive possession can be expressed through analytic constructions that are non-existent in Standard Arabic but which appear in all dialects (Ferguson 1959, Eksell Harning 1980). These constructions are formed through the use of the genitive exponent *mtɛːʕ* followed either by a nominal or a pronominal possessor.

The main argument is that frequent code-switching and the presence of a considerable number of French loanwords in the Tunisian dialect contribute to the spread of the analytic form. While it is true that the analytic form has been spreading in Arabic vernaculars in general, the position that will be adopted here is that lexical insertions from other languages especially favor the use of the genitive exponent at the expense of the synthetic possessive constructions that are more commonly used with native vocabulary. A set of internal and external variables are explored to show that while several factors can condition variation in the expression of attributive possession, including pragmatic functions, language contact has to be taken into consideration to explain the overall increase in the use of the analytic constructions.

Results are compared to other cases of Arabic in contact with other languages, including the cases of Andalusi Arabic (Ferrando 1995), Maltese (Mori 2009), Nigerian Arabic (Owens 2005) and Moroccan Arabic (Boumans 2006), to make the argument that loanwords and code-switched nouns strongly favor the analytic constructions.