Internal Versus External Possession in Lebanese Arabic

This paper is empirical in scope, aiming to document the division of labor between internal and external possession constructions (IPCs vs. EPCs) in Lebanese Arabic. Both types, illustrated in (1) and (2) respectively, involve a possessor and a possessum (in this case, ‘her’ and ‘store’), but they are different semantically, structurally, and pragmatically.

(1) Ziya:d t'araj mahall-a:
Ziad painted store-her
‘Ziad painted her store.’

(2) Ziya:d t'araj-la: l-mahall
Ziad painted-her.DAT the-store
‘Ziad painted her.DAT the store.’

Semantically, several possession relations may be expressed via either an IPC or an EPC. These include alienable and inalienable possession, kinship relations, and agent and theme relations, as (3-4) illustrate.

(3) Agent Relation in an IPC
sawwarit huğu:m-un ʕa-lʕa:sˁme
I.recorded their invasion-on the-capital
‘I recorded their invasion of the capital.’

(4) Agent Relation in an IPC
sawwarit-lun huğu:m-un ʕa-lʕa:sˁme
I.recorded- them.DAT invasion-their on-the-capital
‘I recorded them.DAT their invasion of the capital.’

At the same time, IPCs may express possession relations that are not possible in EPCs. These include identity, partitive, compositional, content, purpose, and measurement relations. (5) and (6) are examples.

(5) Identity Relation in an IPC
zaru: madi:nit Bayru:t
they.visited city-her for-Beirut
‘They visited the city of Beirut.’

(6) * Identity Relation in an IPC
zaru:la madi:nit-a: la-Bayru:t
they.visited-her.DAT city-her for-Beirut

More importantly for our purposes, EPCs may express a range of relations that are not possible in IPCs. For example, instants of possession minus ownership (see Heine 2006; Aikhenvald and Dixon 2012), or what Landau (1999) and Lee-Schoenfeld (2006) refer to as transitory or temporary possessions are readily expressed in EPCs but not in IPCs. In (7), the referent of the dative has Karim’s car in her possession, but she does not own the car. The IPC counterpart of (7) would be ungrammatical.

(7) Ziya:d yassal-la:
Ziad washed-her.DAT the-car that she.borrowed-it from Karim
‘Ziad washed the car that she borrowed from Karim while it was in her possession.’

EPCs can be different structurally as well. In addition to the well-documented fact that the possessor and possessum form a constituent in IPCs but not EPCs, only the dative in an EPC may enter a possessor-possessum relation with a non-DP argument; e.g., a CP as in (8). Also, an EPC allows for an implied/unpronounced possessum, such as <songs-his> in (9). An IPC cannot do the same.

I.memorized-her.DAT what she.orders when she.come to-the-restaurant
‘I memorized what she orders when she comes to the restaurant.’

(9) btimäß-lo: <ʔa:y:ni>-ʔ la-hayda l-muʔrib?
you.listen- him.DAT <songs-his> for-this the-singer?
‘Do you listen to this singer’s <songs>?’

Pragmatically, possessors are more salient in EPCs; they are depicted as topics, affectees, and/or objects of empathy (see O’Connor 2007; Payne and Barshi 1999). For example, the EPC in (2) is pragmatically about the possessor as a topic or affectee, whereas the IPC in (1) is strictly about the possessum. Clear tests will be used to show the difference.

Possession constructions are a cross-linguistic phenomenon that comes in two broad flavors: (i) internal possession and (ii) external possession. At first blush, the two types may look interchangeable and thus constitute a semantic, structural, and pragmatic redundancy. This paper uses evidence from Lebanese Arabic to show that this is not the case.
References: