

# Possessive noun phrases in Maltese: Alienability, iconicity and grammaticalization

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By comparing the formal and semantic properties of two structurally different possessive NPs in Maltese, the paper shows that Maltese corroborates cross-linguistic generalizations on the alienability distinction. On the basis of historical data and comparison with other Arabic dialects, it will be argued that the rise of this distinction may be accounted for by the historical development of Maltese, in particular by the loss of morphological cases, by the subsequent introduction and grammaticalization of a new periphrastic construction and by the accompanying fossilization of the more archaic possessive construction. Constructions with stacked genitives and nominalizations will be examined as two particular instances of this general development.

## 0. Introduction

This paper deals with two structurally different possessive NPs in Maltese - Construct State-NPs (hence CSCs, cf. (1a)) and constructions with "analytical genitives" (the term used in Eksell Harning (1980), hence AGCs, cf. (1b))<sup>1</sup>:

- (1) a. bin is-sultān  
son DEF-king  
'the king's son' (Eksell Harning 1980:148)
- b. is-sigġu ta' Pietru  
DEF-chair of Peter  
'Peter's chair'

The two constructions are primarily distinguished as referring to *alienable* vs. *inalienable possession*, and it will be shown that Maltese corroborates cross-linguistic generalizations on the alienability distinction. In particular, CSCs and AGCs conform to the *principle of iconicity*. In this paper, I will be mainly concerned with the rise of the alienability distinction in Maltese. I will argue that the emergence of this opposition in Maltese, as well as its iconicity may be accounted for by *grammaticalization* of the AG marker and gradual *fossilization* of the more archaic CSC. We will also briefly examine two particular instances of this development in Maltese - NPs with *stacked genitives* and *nominalizations*.

## 1. Maltese possessive NPs and iconic motivation

Let us start by comparing the main features of the two constructions in (1) – both their semantics, and their formal features (see Fabri's paper in this volume for the detailed analysis of Construct State-NPs). The two main constituents of CSCs and AGCs will be alternatively referred to as the head or the possessed vs. the dependent, the possessor, or the genitive (the Construct Genitive (CG) and the Analytic Genitive respectively). Note thus that throughout this paper the term "genitive" will be used not in its strict morphological sense, but rather as an abbreviation for "a NP which has the same form as the dependent/possessor in a possessive NP". The terms "Synthetic Genitive" (SG) and "constructions with Synthetic Genitives" (SGCs), with reference to Classical Arabic, will be added to the terms CS(C) and AG(C) in section 3.

To start with *semantics*, as mentioned in Fabri (this volume), in modern Maltese, CSCs are severely restricted and are mainly used with head-nouns referring to kinship relations (cf. (1a)) and bodyparts (cf. (2)):

- (2) id ir-ragel  
hand DEF-man  
'the man's hand'

Since these words are examples of inalienably possessed objects par excellence, we may say that CSCs are primarily used to refer to *inalienable possession*. AGCs, on the other hand, have a very wide range of uses, including reference to concrete, *alienable possession*, as in (1b). In section 2 I will give a detailed overview of the meanings and uses associated with both types of possessive NPs.

With respect to their *formal features*, CSCs and AGCs differ 1) in the structural type of their head-nominal, 2) in the marking of the relation between the head-nominal and the dependent-nominal, and 3) in the restrictions on adjacency between the two.

1) In CSCs, only the (non-pronominal) possessor may have its own determiners, while in AGCs, both the head and the dependent are full-fledged NPs. This formal difference has a semantic correlate: the head-nominal in CSCs (and the whole construction) gets a definite interpretation. One way of describing this difference would be to consider the possessor as the determiner of the head-nominal (see Lyons (1985, 1986) on the distinction between 'determiner-genitives' and 'adjectival-genitives'). For more details and an alternative analysis see Fabri (this volume, section 2.2.).

2) In CSCs, the non-pronominal possessor appears without any

markers which would explicitly specify its relation to the head. While most head-nominals turn up in the nonmarked form either, there is a subclass of feminine nouns which distinguish between the "absolute state-form", ending in -a in singular, and the "construct state-form", ending in -t (the so-called *marbuta*), see (6) in Fabri (ibid.). In CSCs with pronominal possessors, the head-noun in the construct state attaches pronominal suffixes, as in (3) (where "CS" refers to *t marbuta*, the absolute state being *zija*):

- (3) zi-t-i  
aunt-CS-1SG  
'my aunt'

In AGCs, the non-pronominal possessor is marked for its relation to the head by the preposition *ta'*. Pronominal possessors turn up as a combination of the special forms of the preposition *ta'* with the same pronominal suffixes as in CSCs, cf. (4):

- (4) is-siggu tiegh-i  
DEF-chair of-1SG  
'my chair'

Thus, while AGCs employ marking which is syntactically associated with the dependent, CSCs with pronominal possessors should probably be analyzed as being head-marked (at least this is assumed in Nichols (1988 and 1992)). It is considerably less clear to which extent *t marbuta* per se is an instance of head-marking, and most CSCs with non-pronominal possessors do not employ morphological marking at all.

3) As described in Fabri (this volume, sections 2.1. and 2.3), the possessor-noun in CSCs is right adjacent to the possessed noun. And whenever the possessed noun has its own attributes, these must appear after the possessor-noun, as in (13), ibid. This restriction does not concern AGCs, cf. (5) below:

- (5) is-siggu z-zghir ta' Pietru  
DEF-chair DEF-little of Peter  
'Peter's little chair'

The three structural differences between CSCs and AGCs can in fact be viewed as three manifestations of one global formal distinction between them, i.e. that CSCs involve a "tighter structural bond or closer connection between possessed and possessor" (Nichols 1992 : 117) than AGCs. On the one hand, the tightness of the bond between the two parts

in a CSC is evident in the fact that its head-nominal needs the possessor-nominal to become a noun phrase, while both the possessed and the possessor in an AGC are full-fledged NPs and may be used on their own. On the other hand, the closer connection between the possessed and possessor in CSCs than that in AGCs is easily interpreted as the closer formal, or *linguistic distance* between the two expressions, which is measured in accordance with the nature and number of morphemes between them (the concept of linguistic distance is taken from Haiman (1985: 106)). The following table represents this information for CSCs and AGCs, both with pronominal and nominal possessors (X and Y refer to the possessed noun and the possessor respectively; "+" and "#" refer to morpheme- vs. word-boundaries, and *t* in parentheses refers to *tmarbuta*).

	CSC	AGC
Pronominal possessors	X(+t) + Y	X # ta + Y
Nominal possessors	X(+t) # Y	X # ta' # Y

As it is clear from the table, in both cases, i.e. both in constructions with pronominal and nominal possessors, the linguistic distance between X and Y in CSCs is less than in AGCs.

The two-sided distinction (i.e. in both semantics and form) between CSCs and AGCs in Maltese fits very well into the cross-linguistic generalizations on the marking of inalienable and alienable possession, as they are discussed in Haiman (1985:130-6) and Nichols (1988, 1992:116-23).

For Haiman, possessive constructions provide clear examples of *iconic motivation*, whereby "the greater the formal distance between X and Y, the greater the conceptual distance between the notions they represent" (Haiman 1985:106).<sup>2</sup> While *conceptual distance* is fairly difficult to be captured in a general definition, in the case of possession this does not pose great problems. To quote Haiman again,

"it seems intuitively clear that conceptual distance is greater where possession is *alienable* than when it is not: possessor and possessum are not indissolubly bound together where possession is alienable, either in fact or in the perception of speakers" (ibid.: 130).

And, as we have seen, in Maltese, the smaller linguistic distance between the possessed and the possessor in CSCs corresponds to the closer conceptual link (inalienable possession), while the greater linguistic distance between the possessed and the possessor in AGCs corresponds to the looser conceptual link (alienable possession).

Haiman (ibid.: 130-6) provides a number of examples from various languages which distinguish between inalienable and alienable

possession and in which this generalization holds. The following examples from Eastern Pomo (Hokan: Pomoan, North America, cf. (6)) and Nakanai (Austronesian, New Guinea, cf. (7)), which look more or less like the Maltese NPs in (3-4), illustrate Haiman's point for NPs with pronominal possessors: inalienable possession is indicated by an affix attached to the possessed nominal, while alienable possession is indicated by a free-standing possessive pronoun.<sup>3</sup>

- (6) *Eastern Pomo*  
 a. *Inalienable:*  
 wí-bayle  
 1SG-husband  
 'my husband'  
 b. *Alienable:*  
 wáx sá-ri  
 my-GEN basket  
 'my basket'  
 (McLendon 1975:92, 108, quoted in Nichols 1992:118)

- (7) *Nakanai*  
 a. *Inalienable:*  
 lima-gu  
 hand-1SG  
 'my hand'  
 b. *Alienable:*  
 luma t-aku  
 house POSS-1SG  
 'my house'  
 (Johnston 1981:217, quoted in Haiman 1985:131)

Haiman's examples include also possessive NPs in Moroccan Arabic, which are formally parallel to the Maltese NPs quoted so far, apart from the different marker of AG: *dyal* instead of *ta'*:

- (8) *Moroccan Arabic*  
 a. šeār-ha  
 hair-3SG.F  
 'her hair'  
 b. s-sarut dyal-hom  
 DEF-key of-3PL  
 'their key' (Haiman ibid.:133)

We will return to the situation in Moroccan Arabic in sections 4 and 5. While Haiman concentrates on possessive NPs which differ in the linguistic distance between the possessed and the possessor, Nichols

(1988, 1992:116-23) mentions that there are some languages in which the alienability opposition is not reflected in any corresponding difference in the linguistic distance, such as Washo (Hokan) and the Iroquoian languages. However, she states that of the 77 languages with this opposition in her 167 language sample, there are no languages with exclusively dependent-marking possession. Thus, while in Washo and the Iroquoian languages the alienability opposition simply exploits two sets of pronominal affixes (identical to the subject and object pronominal markers on verbs), there are no languages with two different genitive endings, which would distinguish between possessors in NPs with inalienable and alienable possession. According to Nichols, most languages with head-marked possession manifest the alienability opposition.

It is clear that Maltese NPs with pronominal possessors, which turn up as head marking on the inalienably possessed nominals, conform to Nichols' correlation between the alienability distinction and head/dependent marking. And on the whole possessive NPs in Maltese bear on Nichols' correlation by not implementing the alienability distinction solely by dependent marking.

In the main part of this paper we will examine how the alienability distinction has arisen in Maltese (and in Moroccan Arabic) and how its semantic and formal characteristics may be accounted for by this historical development. Before doing that, we will have a closer look at the semantics of AGCs and CSCs in Maltese.

## 2. Semantics of AGCs and CSCs in Maltese

The characterization of the semantic opposition between AGCs and CSCs as an alienability opposition, given in the previous section, does not in fact say so much about the actual range of their uses. First, as has been repeatedly noted, the exact range of relations covered by inalienable constructions considerably vary from language to language (Chappell & McGregor 1989, Nichols 1988 and Haiman 1985). And also many of the relations referred to by AGCs are fairly far from purely possessive relations. Together AGCs and CSCs are responsible for most of the meanings, or uses associated with genitive constructions in languages with morphological cases, such as Lithuanian, Finnish, or Classical Arabic. Let us now look at these uses (the classification of semantic categories follows mainly the terminology adopted in Eksell Harning (1980) on the basis of Reckendorf (1921:135-149)).

AGCs have a very wide range of distribution, and I will illustrate only the most central among their uses. In addition to *concrete*, or *alienable possession* (cf. (1b)), AGs are used for *qualification* of the head-

nominal by reference to its material (9a), purpose (9b), value (9c), age (9d), characteristic quantity (9e), quality (9f) or similarity (9g). The AG may also qualify the head-nominal by referring to the *time* (10a), *duration* (10b) and *location* or *origin* (10c) of its referent.

- (9) a. *Material*  
 ie-čurkett ta-d-deheb  
 DEF-ring of-DEF-gold  
 'the golden ring'
- b. *Purpose*  
 is-sikkina ta-l-hobż  
 DEF-knife of-DEF-bread  
 'the bread knife'
- c. *Value*  
 pittura ta' żewġ liri  
 picture of two pounds  
 'a picture worth two pound'
- d. *Age*  
 it-tifla ta' hmistax-il sena  
 DEF-girl of fifteen year  
 'the girl of fifteen years'
- e. *Quantity*  
 merħla ta' mitt naghga  
 herd of hundred sheep:SG  
 'a herd of hundred sheep'
- f. *Quality*  
 kittieb ta' talent kbir  
 writer of talent big  
 'a writer of big talent'
- g. *Similarity*  
 ghajnejn ta' serq  
 eye:DU of hawk  
 'eyes of a hawk, hawk eyes'
- (10) a. *Time*  
 il-fjura ta-r-rebbiegħa  
 DEF-flower of DEF-spring  
 'the spring flower'
- b. *Duration*  
 vjaġġ ta' sagħ-tejn  
 journey of hour-DU  
 'a two hours' journey'
- c. *Location / origin*  
 l-animali ta' l-Afrika  
 DEF-animals of-DEF-Africa  
 'Africa's animals'

Possession is not restricted to concrete objects, but may also involve abstract entities, as in (11):

- (11) il-vuċi ta-l-kantant  
 DEF-voice of-DEF-singer  
 'the singer's voice'

Part-whole relations are also referred to by means of AGCs:

- (12) is-saqaf ta-l-knisja  
 DEF-ceiling of-DEF-church  
 'the ceiling of the church'

Certain *kinship terms*, especially those referring to *marriage relations*, may (optionally) take *ta'*-attributes (for the details see Fabri this volume, section 3, cf. (19b)). Some other important uses of AGCs in Maltese, which are outside of Eksell Harning's (1980) classification, include relations of *authorship* (cf. (13)) and *property* (cf. (14)):

- (13) is-sinfoniji ta' Mozart  
 DEF-symphony:PL of Mozart  
 'Mozart's symphonies'
- (14) id-dalma ta' xitwa Svediza  
 DEF-darkness of winter Swedish  
 'the darkness of the Swedish winter'

In the most frequent cases CSCs have kinship terms (including 'friend') and names for body parts as their head. The word *dar* 'house' can also (optionally) head a CSC which in this case refers to *concrete possessor*:

- (15) dar il-qassis  
 house DEF-priest  
 'the priest's house'

Fabri (this volume) and Fenech (1978: 67-69) give a representative list of expressions involving CSCs which includes examples of abstract nouns (like 'the children's wish' or 'the king's word') and time periods ('the tomato season' or 'the eve of the feast'). There is also a significant difference in the frequency of CSCs across different styles: thus, literary Maltese uses CSCs much more frequently than both spoken and journalistic Maltese (Fenech *ibid.*).

Now, the important point here is that the CSC is only used with a limited set of head-nouns and, thus, is not a productive syntactic

construction. In this respect Maltese behaves as a typical language with an alienability distinction, in which "the nouns that take what is (or can be) called 'inalienable' possession virtually always form a closed set, often a small one, while those taking 'alienable' possession are an open, hence infinite, set" (Nichols 1988). As mentioned above, the exact set of inalienable nominals is subject to cross-linguistic variation and includes normally kinship terms and/or body-part names, sometimes parts of inanimate entities, certain important cultural concepts (like one's home, arrows, domestic animals), 'exuviae (such as blood, sweat and tears); aspects of the personality including emotions; forms of personal representation such as terms for soul, reputation and name; and concepts involving images of the person such as footprints, shadow, story or song" (Chappell & McGregor 1989:27).

It should also be mentioned that neither the AGC nor the CSC is normally used for *pseudopartitive* (cf. (16)) and *appositional* (cf. (17a), cf., however, (17b)) constructions (cross-linguistically, these are often covered by possessive NPs):

- (16) it-tazza nbid Franciż  
 DEF-cup wine French  
 'the cup of French wine'
- (17) a. il-belt Valletta  
 DEF-city Valletta  
 'the city of Valletta'
- b. il-belt ta' Stockholm  
 DEF-city of Stockholm  
 'the city of Stockholm'

### 3. Development of AGCs in Modern Arabic dialects

#### 3.1. AGCs and CSCs in Modern Arabic dialects

The alienability opposition in Maltese and, in general, the use of AGCs as opposed to CSCs in the modern Arabic dialects is a post-Classical innovation, as compared to Classical Arabic. Classical Arabic consistently resorted to what we will call "constructions with synthetic genitives" (SGC, see Eksell Harning 1980) for a wide range of meanings. SGCs were in a certain way double-marked: the possessor-nominal was dependent-marked with the morphological genitive, while the head-nominal appeared in the construct state. All the modern dialects have lost the morphological genitive, and in most of them there are now two different possessive NPs which together cover the range of uses characteristic of SGCs in Classical Arabic. CSCs and AGCs have also

divided in between themselves the defining formal features of SGCs: AGCs resort to dependent-marking (however, analytic instead of morphological), while head-nominals in CSCs appear in the construct state and immediately precede the possessor-nominal.

The actual division of labour between CSCs and AGCs across the modern Arabic dialects as compared to the situation in Classical Arabic constitutes the primary object of Eksell Harming's (1980). This thoroughly accomplished study, based on the analysis of published prose texts in a number of dialects, provides very valuable information on the semantic categories of AGCs and CSCs, on their frequency in texts and on various additional factors (primarily, syntactic and stylistic) which may influence the choice between them. Although the study is mainly synchronic, it may be characterized as an example of intragenetic comparison (a term introduced in Greenberg 1969), by which the different patterns in the modern dialects may be considered as different stages in the overall development of AGCs, or in its *grammaticalization* (although the latter term is not used by Eksell Harming).

The form and the source for the exponents in AGCs, or the AG-marker, varies across the dialects. As Eksell Harming shows, there are two main sources for AG-markers: a) nouns with the meaning 'possession' or 'property' (which in their turn correspond to the verbs meaning 'to belong'), and b) relative pronouns or particles built up from relative and/or demonstrative elements. The actual etymology of the AG-marker does not seem to play any considerable rôle in the following development of the construction: once introduced at a certain place, all these exponents undergo more or less similar functional processes. Thus, the marker *dyaal-* in the Moroccan Arabic example (8) seems to develop from a demonstrative-relative element (Eksell Harming *ibid.*:112), while the Maltese AG-marker *ta'* originates from the noun 'possession, property' (*ibid.*:146, 98-9).

The following patterns found in the Modern Arabic dialects may be viewed as the different stages in the development of AGCs (the labels for the stages are mine, MKT; those dialects in which the exponent for AGCs is a cognate of the Maltese *ta'* are italicized).

0. THE INITIAL STAGE: the AGC is not used at all, while the CSC is used with a wide range of meanings. This pattern is found, e.g., in rural dialects of Syria, Palestine and Lebanon, as well as in Uzbekistan;
1. INTRODUCTION OF AGC: the AGC occurs sporadically in a few meanings (the frequency of AGCs to CSCs is less than 1 : 25), mostly due to formal reasons. This pattern is found, e.g., in the dialects of the Persian Gulf, in the madani dialects of Lebanon, and in the madani and rural dialects of *Syria and Palestine*;

2. ESTABLISHMENT OF AGC: the AGC is well established, i.e. used regularly in certain semantic categories (the frequency of AGCs to CSCs is about 1 : 17 - 1 : 25) and is often chosen due to formal and stylistic reasons. However, CSC can still be used in all these meanings. This pattern is found, e.g., in Mecca, Baghdad, rural dialects of central Iraq (*gelet*), in rural/bedawi dialects of southwestern Morocco and in the dialects of the *Muslims in Tunis*;
3. EXPANSION OF AGC: the AGC is very well established, it gains terrain at the cost of the CSC, both as regards frequency (the frequency of AGCs to CSCs is about 1 : 6 - 1 : 8) and range of semantic categories (i.e., it is used with a greater range of semantic functions than before). CSC can still be used in all of its initial functions, although in certain functions the AG is preferred. This pattern is found in *Cairo* and in *rural dialects of Lower Egypt*;

4. RETREAT OF CSC: the AGC is very well established, it is used very frequently (the frequency of AGCs to CSCs is 1 : 3 - 1 : 6) and replaces CSC in certain functions. The choice between the AGC and CSC tends to be governed by semantic rules, but certain formal and stylistic factors may influence the choice as well. This pattern is found in dialects of the *Jews in Tunisia*, in rural/bedawi dialects of *northwestern Algeria* and in Tripoli;

5. FOSSILIZATION OF CSC: the AGC is the normal way of expressing "genitive" relations between two nominals, while the CSC is restricted to NPs with typical inalienably possessed nominals and certain more or less fossilized expressions. The frequency of AGCs to CSCs is about 1 : 2 - 1 : 1. This pattern is found in the madani dialects of *Algeria* and Morocco, on *Malta* and in the village of Daragözü (Anatolia).

### 3.2. Grammaticalization of the AG in the Modern Arabic dialects

Using the data in Eksell Harming (1980), I will show in this section that the development of the AG in Modern Arabic involves grammaticalization of the AG-marker. I will restrict myself to *ta'*-dialects - i.e., those dialects in which the AG-marker is a cognate of the Maltese *ta'*. Since this AG-marker originates as a noun with the meaning 'belonging, possession', the purpose of this section is to examine in detail how the original construction of the type

'the-chair possession-of Ahmed',

where all the three parts are lexemes (and where the first two of them are, probably, involved in an appositional relation to each other), has turned into the construction of the type

'the-chair of Ahmed',

which has only two lexical elements connected by a grammatical marker. In Maltese, where the former lexical element has developed into a regular grammatical means of expressing various relations between two nominals, this grammaticalization process has gone further than in any other of the *ta'*-dialects. The process of grammaticalization will be mainly characterized in terms suggested in Lehmann (1982) and Heine & Reh (1984).

As is clear from the presentation in 3.1., Eksell Harning distinguishes the six patterns on the basis of the relative frequency of CSCs vs. AGCs and of the range of semantic categories expressed by them. These two parameters are obviously interrelated. However, there is still a third parameter, which shows a significant degree of correlation with these two and which will be considered here - the actual formal characteristics of the AG-marker.

The following diagram visualizes the information on the relative frequency of CSCs and AGCs across Modern Arabic dialects (not restricted to *ta'*-dialects). Note that the figure gives a very rough approximation to the frequency data.

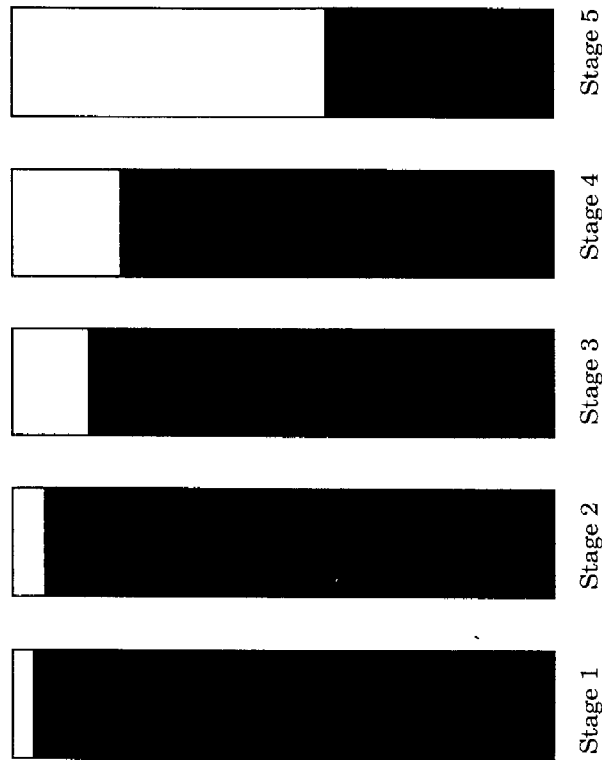


Fig. 1. Relative frequency of CSCs (■) and AGCs (□) at the different stages of development of the AG (based on the discussion in Eksell Harning (1980:158-60)).

Although the figure demonstrates a dramatic increase in the frequency of AGCs at the cost of CSCs, it is remarkable that even at the last attested stage CSCs have a relatively high frequency. We will return to this phenomenon in section 4.

The following figure shows the range of semantic categories expressed by CSCs and AGCs at the five non-initial stages in the development of the AG. The stages are represented by:

- Stage 1 - Madani and rural dialects of Palestine and Syria;
- Stage 2 - Dialects of the Muslims in Tunis;
- Stage 3 - Dialects in Egypt (Cairo and rural dialects in Lower Egypt)
- Stage 4 - Dialects in Algeria
- Stage 5 - Maltese

	STAGE I	STAGE 2	STAGE 3	STAGE 4	STAGE 5
<i>Construct State NPs</i>					
Possession	●	●	●	●	●
Quality	●	●	●	●	●
Time/place	●	●	●	●	●
Authority	●	●	●	●	●
Abstract pos.	●	●	●	●	●
Material	●	●	●	●	●
Part-whole	●	●	●	●	●
Duration	●	●	●	●	●
Marriage rel.	●	●	●	●	●
Kinship	●	●	●	●	●
Body part	●	●	●	●	●
<i>NPs with Analytical Genitives</i>					
Possession	●	●	●	●	●
Quality	●	●	●	●	●
Time/Place	●	●	●	●	●
Authority	●	●	●	●	●
Abstract pos.	●	●	●	●	●
Material	○	○	○	○	○
Part-whole	○	○	○	○	○
Duration	○	○	○	○	○
Marriage rel.	○	○	○	○	○
Kinship	○	○	○	○	○
Body part	○	○	○	○	○

Fig. 2. Semantic categories expressed by CSCs and AGCs across the modern Arabic dialects (primarily based on the data and discussion in Eksell Harning (1980) and on the data in Fabri (this volume)). The actual construction: never expresses a given semantic category (○), expresses it in single cases and/or in more or less fossilized expressions (●), expresses it fairly often to be considered a productive use (●), is the regular way of expressing it (●).

It is somehow surprising that already at the first stage of those attested in Eksell Harning (1980), the AG (the new construction) has a relatively wide range of uses. However, since the AG marker in the *ta'*-dialects originates as a noun meaning 'belonging, possession', it is reasonable to postulate a stage when the AG is restricted to pure possession.

Fig. 2 should only be taken as a fairly rough approximation to the actual situation in the *ta'*-dialects. First of all, Eksell Harning's semantic categories are often too general and sometimes incomparable: thus, each of the examples 'the daughter's servant', 'his ruler' and 'the King of Tolba' is classified as representing the category 'Authority' (ibid.: 57, 136). This is particularly relevant for the categories 'Duration' and 'Possession of an abstract noun'. And second, since the study is based on published prosaic texts, the absence of examples in a certain category does not mean per se that this category can never be expressed by the actual construction. Still it is clear that there is a considerable degree of symmetry in the order by which semantic categories are "gained" by the AGC and are "lost" by the CSC. In other words, the retreat of CSCs is, to a certain degree, a mirror-image of the expansion of AGCs, although the two-dimensional character of Fig. 2 is obviously an idealization (we will touch upon this point in Section 4).

Thus, among the first semantic categories expressed by AGCs are *Possession* (both of concrete and abstract objects) and *Quality*, as well as 'Time/Place', 'Authority' and 'Relations of marriage'. On the other hand, 'Possession' and 'Quality' are the first semantic categories which cannot be expressed by dependents in CSCs. When all the other uses are lost, CSCs are still retained for nouns referring to inalienably possessed (*Intimate*) *kinship* and *Body parts*. Such relations are, however, the very last categories gained by AGCs. We will return to the semantics of AGCs and CSCs in the next section.

Now, what we witness here is a functional development which affects *semantic integrity* (Lehmann 1982:127) of the word with the original meaning 'belonging, possession'. As a result of *dese semanticization* and *expansion* its lexical meaning shifts to the meaning of grammatical items and gradually gains additional grammatical functions (Heine & Reh 1984:36, 39).

This functional process is paralleled by certain morphosyntactic and phonetic changes. First of all, the AG marker undergoes *obligatorification*: while at the initial stages it is an optional element in the whole construction, which constitutes a fairly weak "rival" for the much more frequent CSC, at the later stages the AG marker is indispensable in most situations, since CSCs have already lost these uses. CSCs, on the other hand, undergo a gradual process of *fossilization*:

their use in Maltese is not productive any longer and is limited to a specific closed class of words (thus, for instance, in most varieties of Maltese only Semitic and Siculo-Italian nouns and never new borrowings from English and French can be the head of such NPs, Fenech 1978:67).<sup>4</sup>

Let us now look at two formal characteristics of the AG marker in the *ta'*-dialects: its phonetic shape and its inflectional possibilities. As Eksell Harning shows, in some dialects the AG marker agrees with the head-nominal in gender and number, as in the following examples:<sup>5</sup>

- (18) *Palestine Arabic*  
 l-byūt btā'-ūn-i  
 DEF-house:PL of:PL-1SG  
 'my houses'  
 (Bauer 1926:71, 1d quoted in Eksell Harning 1980:54)

- (19) *Egyptian Arabic*  
 a. id-dāda bta't-u  
 DEF-nurse of:F.SG-3SG  
 'his nurse'  
 b. il-'abdēn betū'-u  
 DEF-slave:PL of:PL-3SG  
 'his two slaves'  
 (Elder 1927:8, 129 quoted in Eksell Harning ibid.:85)

The *ta'*-dialects vary as to whether this agreement is obligatory, optional or does not occur at all. The following figure, which is based on the data in Eksell Harning, correlates the actual shape of the AG marker and its agreement pattern with the stages in the development of the AG. Note that it presents information on more dialects than fig. 2 (Eksell Harning states that the dialects of Jews in Tunis and madani dialects in Algeria manifest stages 4 and 5 respectively, without specifying the details on the exact distribution of CSCs and AGCs in them).

Agreement	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5
Oblig. agr.	mtā', btā'				
Option. agr.		mtā'	b'tā'	ntā' <sup>1</sup>	ntā' <sup>1</sup> ta' <sup>2</sup>
No agreement.					
				1 Algeria 2 Jews in Tunis	1 Algeria 2 Malta

Fig. 3. AG-markers and their agreement possibilities across *ta'*-dialects (based on the data in Eksell Harning (1980))



The phonetic changes in the shape of the AG marker show some degree of correlation with the functional process sketched above, at least at the last two stages of development. The emergence of the variety *ntā* may be viewed as a result of 'adaptation' (in this case assimilation), by which a bilabial consonant has been replaced by a dental nasal preceding another dental consonant. The Maltese variety has undergone more dramatic changes compared with the original form of the marker: as a result of 'erosion', the initial consonant of the AG marker has been lost and its long vowel has been reduced.

The variation in the inflectional possibilities of the AG marker in *ta* -dialects shows a process of 'simplification', by which the AG marker gradually loses its cross-cutting paradigmatic distinctions and starts using one form to cover its whole paradigm. This process is of course closely related to the functional processes described above. Thus, at the initial stage, the AG marker still retains much of its lexical features and also shares the inflectional pattern with other nominal words in the language. The gradual loss of gender/number distinctions accompanies the looser association of the AG marker with the nominal class. The absence of any gender/number distinctions in the Maltese AG marker shows a definite break in any association between *ta*' and the class of nominals.

It might be argued that the Maltese marker *ta*' has still some connection with the nominal paradigm in that it can attach personal suffixes (see section 1). However, only a restricted set of nominals attach these suffixes, and besides that, this behaviour is not unique for nominals. The same suffixes (with the exception for 1SG) are used as verbal object affixes. And there is also a number of prepositions which take these suffixes in the same way as *ta*'. Within this class, *ta*' and *ma*' 'with' are set apart in having two stems depending on the personal suffix they attach, as can be seen in the following table (Aquilina 1965:108) (the alternation between ' and *gh* follows a more general orthographic rule):

	ma' 'with'	ta' 'of'
1SG	mieghi	tieghi
2SG	mieghek	tieghek
3SG.M	miegħu	tiegħu
3SG.F	maghha	tagħha
1PL	magħna	tagħna
2PL	magħkom	tagħkom
3PL	magħhom	tagħhom

*Ta*' behaves also like several other simple prepositions in attaching the definite article when it is followed by a definite nominal, e.g. *lil tifla*

'to (a) girl' vs. *lil-tifla* 'to:the-girl' (Aquilina *ibid.*:110) and *ta*' (*wiefted*) 'tiefel' 'of (one) boy' vs. *ta-t-tifel* 'of-the-boy'. On the whole, synchronically, *ta*' has been integrated into the class of prepositions, which is much smaller than that of nominals, or has undergone 'paradigmaticization' (Lehmann 1982:134).

#### 4. The rise of the alienability distinction in Maltese

Now we will return to the starting point of this paper, the Maltese alienability distinction and its iconicity, and try to relate it to the discussion in sections 3.1. and 3.2. We see that:

- 1) The Maltese alienability distinction has arisen due to the introduction of a new kind of possessive NPs (AGCs) and the fossilization of the old one (CSCs).
- 2) Iconicity of the Maltese alienability distinction is clearly related to its historical development: the original construction, which has "fossilized" and is primarily used for inalienables, is shorter and simpler than the new construction, which covers the domain of alienable possession.

This development is not unique for Maltese (and Moroccan Arabic), but finds parallels in other languages. Thus, Heine, Claudi & Hünemeyer (1991: Ch. 6) suggest that the introduction of the alienability distinction in quite a number of African languages is caused by an emergence of a more explicit possessive construction for the expression of alienable possession and specialization of the former possessive construction for referring to inalienable possession. This is illustrated by the case of Kabiye (Niger-Congo: Gur), where the source of grammaticalization for the new possessive marker is the noun with the meaning 'house'. However, Heine, Claudi & Hünemeyer do not discuss why this should be so. In what follows I will speculate about the reasons for such a development, at least in Maltese, and discuss the following interrelated issues: why the new construction is introduced, why it is introduced for certain specific uses, and why the older construction is retained for inalienables.

As mentioned in 3.1., the emergence of AGCs follows the loss of morphological cases in Arabic. The loss of the morphological genitive in a former SGC has considerably reduced the formal connection between the two nominals. Since many nominals do not distinguish between the absolute and construct form, juxtaposition alone signals their relations to dependent-nominals in what has become CSCs. Such NPs are fairly economic and cross-linguistically quite common:

(20) *Mauritian Creole*

lakaz lerwa  
house king  
'the king's house' (Corne 1986:159)

(21) *Kobon*

Dumnab ram  
Dumnab house  
'Dumnab's house' (Davies 1981:57)

However, the weak formal connection between the parts in a CSC might lead to a need in specifying the relation between the two nominals, in making it more salient, more pronounced. This need gives impetus to the introduction of a more explicit periphrastic construction which later turns into a regular way of expressing various relations between two nominals. The new construction might probably be seen as a special instance of 'reinforcement': the new marker combines with the formal characteristics of the old construction (juxtaposition and possessive suffixes in NPs with pronominal possessors).

A plausible interpretation of the fact that the new construction is not introduced simultaneously for all the uses of former SGCs is that it emerges first of all in those uses where the need for it is most acute, most pronounced. So the question is: why do constructions referring to pure possession need an explicit relation marker to a much higher degree than constructions referring to kinship terms and body parts?

It turns out that the need for specifying the relation between two nominals is to a high degree dependent on the semantics of the head noun. We will start by comparing typical heads in inalienably and alienably possessive constructions, such as 'son', on the one hand, and 'chair' or 'book', on the other hand.

It is frequently noted that kinship terms are examples par excellence of 'relational nouns'. As Taylor (1989:675) formulates, "to describe someone as a father, a sister, an ex-wife, a relative, or even an ancestor is to make implicit reference to another person, or persons, to whom the designated person stands in an unprofiled kinship relationship". From a slightly different perspective, kinship terms can also be viewed as 'uni-relational' nouns, where "the term 'uni-relational' noun denotes nouns whose semantic structure is such that they conjure up one type of relation with another entity. It is that entity which will be added in the form of a genitive to the uni-relational noun" (Durieux 1990:15).

Both these properties distinguish kinship terms from nominals denoting concrete objects, like 'book' or 'chair'. Such nominals are not relational in that they may describe objects without reference to any

other objects or persons and, thus, may appear on their own, without any additional attributes. And they can also be characterized as 'multi-relational' nouns, since they "do not immediately conjure up one specific relation, but ... can enter in a number of relations with other entities. As a consequence, the interpretation of genitive constructions with a multi-relational head is not completely determined by the semantics of the head noun" (Durieux 1990:17). As noted by numerous authors, the construction *Peter's chair* may have multiple interpretations and refer e.g. to the chair that Peter owns, the chair he has made, the chair he is sitting on, the chair he is looking for, etc.

Let us now look at what consequences these semantic properties have for the occurrence of these words in actual texts. Kinship terms do not normally appear on their own, but are usually accompanied by another nominal. Thus, expressions of the form "Peter's son" or "her son" are considerably more frequent than "a/the son", and the occurrence of a kinship term like "son" makes it reasonable to look for another nominal which could constitute the point of reference for the term. This implies that the mere occurrence of a kinship term accompanied by another nominal, even without any additional formal marking, might naturally be interpreted as indicating that the two nominals are related. And also, due to uni-relationality of kinship terms, there would hardly be any doubts about the relation between the two nominals. Thus, CSCs, with their weak formal link between the parts, turn out to be quite satisfactory constructions for expressing relations of kinship terms. A similar line of argumentation *mutatis mutandis* may be applied to nominals referring to body parts. For multi-relational nominals denoting concrete objects, on the other hand, this is not so: the mere occurrence of such a nominal accompanied by another nominal does not necessarily mean that the two are related. In comparison to uni-relational kinship terms, multi-relational nouns are, accordingly, in a much more acute need of an additional formal means both for marking that they are related to other nominals and also for specifying the kind of relation itself.

Thus, it is easy to understand why the new periphrastic construction is first of all used with multi-relational nouns. It has often been noted that of all the various relations that multi-relational nouns have with genitives, the possession relation has a special status, it is central for the meaning of genitives and constitutes its semantic prototype (e.g. Taylor 1989:679-82, Nikiforidou 1991). While on the whole I doubt that this should be generally so, the development of the AGC in the Arabic *ta'*-dialects corroborates this observation: it is introduced to refer to possession and then is extended to other relations. Various cognitive

