

### Properties of possessive HAVE

Possessive predication typologies distinguish two classes of HAVE-type verbs: A(ction)-HAVE descends historically from action verbs meaning “hold”, “take”, etc. (e.g. English *have*, Latin *habeo*) and is assumed to be transitive. E(xistential)-HAVE shows an existential verb form (e.g. Mandarin *yǒu*, Malay *ada*), and is assumed to be intransitive (Heine 1997, Stassen 2009). This paper argues, in contrast, for a unified possessive HAVE across languages with such a verb, diachronic or synchronic associations notwithstanding, which (i) is two-place, describing an underspecified possessive relation, and (ii) performs a function of presentational focus, thus showing a definiteness effect (DE).

(1)-(3) provide initial evidence for (i). Possessive HAVE in English, Mandarin, and Malay encodes both alienable and inalienable possession. Actual interpretations depend on whether the possessee nominal is relational (inalienable e.g. *sister*:kinship, *thumb*:part-whole) or non-relational (alienable e.g. *car*:ownership/control), indicating HAVE is underspecified.

(1) John has a/the/#every car/sister/crooked finger. English

(2) Sānmáo yǒu liǎng/#nà ge jiějie/bēi-bāo/mǔ-zhǐ  
Sanmao have two/that CL elder.sister/back-pack/thumb  
Sanmao has two/#those elder sisters/backpacks/thumbs. Mandarin

(3) a. Ali ada enam kereta/anak/jari  
Ali have six car/child/finger  
Ali has six cars/children/fingers.  
b. #Ali ada kereta/anak/jari itu  
Ali have car/child/finger that  
Intended: Ali has that car/child/finger. Malay

(1)-(3) also demonstrate the DE of possessive HAVE (Partee 1999). For felicitous interpretation, definite or “strong” NP (Milsark 1974) complements as in *John has the sister* require a context e.g., of planning a VIP visit, where *John* is assigned to entertain the VIP’s sister. Indefinite complement HAVE, however, yields possessive readings both alone and in contexts licensing definite complements: In the VIP context, *John has a sister* could mean *John* will entertain a VIP sister, or be possessive (*John has a sister, so he’ll show the ladies around*). The same effects are found in Mandarin and Malay.

English *have* is disallowed in the existential construction (4a), unlike Mandarin *yǒu* (4b) and Malay *ada* (4c):

(4) a. There are/\*have children nearby!  
b. (zhèr) yǒu rén!  
here have person  
There’s someone (here)!.  
c. Ada lipas di atas meja  
have cockroach at top table  
There’s a cockroach on the table.

Yet possessive HAVE sentences in all three languages exhibit the DE. It is possible to attribute the DE in Mandarin and Malay to the status of *yǒu* and *ada* as existential verbs, but this reasoning is not possible for English. The DE of English *have* supports the current proposal – that English, Mandarin, and Malay uniformly show possessive HAVE despite their differing affinities with action verbs or existential verbs.

I argue *yǒu* and *ada* are polysemous between possessive and existential senses, further supporting a possessive HAVE in Mandarin and Malay. For example, verb-initial *yǒu* sentences yield existential or null subject (arbitrary reference) possessive interpretations, depending on the complement nominal (5). Relational nominals, e.g. sisters, allow only possessive interpretations. Non-relational NPs describing common possessions e.g. cars, yield ambiguity. Items not usually possessed by individuals, e.g. trains, yield an existential interpretation. Since the same surface form allows both interpretations, this indicates possessive *yǒu* and existential *yǒu* are distinct. I demonstrate the same for Malay. Thus in both Mandarin and Malay, a purported E-HAVE shows properties of a two-place possessive HAVE, supporting (i).

(5) yǒu jiěmei / chē / huǒ-chē zhēn hǎo  
have sister / car / train true good  
It’s good [to have a sister/\*that sisters exist] / [to have a car/that cars exist] / [that trains exist/\*to have a train]

Moreover, I show with anaphora facts that in Mandarin, the possessor (Psr) nominal in possessive *yǒu* sentences (2) is a grammatical subject, but in existential *yǒu* sentences, the optional pre-verbal location phrase (4b) is not a subject, further distinguishing existential and possessive *yǒu*. Freeze (1992) considers possessive sentences to be structurally identical to existentials, thus accounting for their DE, but this account cannot distinguish between the subjecthood properties of the pre-verbal nominal in Mandarin possessive and existential *yǒu* sentences. Stassen (2009) assumes that E-HAVE forms intransitive possessive sentences where the Psr is a topic, but argues that topic possessives may develop into transitive possessives where the Psr is a subject. The current proposal is compatible with this understanding, but does not require this to be the case. It predicts, however, that if such a development does occur, the resulting HAVE verb would show properties (i) and (ii).

Proposal (ii), that possessive HAVE is presentational, receives support from the DE of English A-HAVE, and makes predictions about possible developments of A-HAVE. The DE in existential sentences may be attributed to a presentational function of (re-)introducing a discourse participant (Abbott 1993). Treating possessive HAVE as also presentational not only accounts for the DE of English *have*, it also predicts that A-HAVE may develop an existential sense, exemplified by Serbo-Croatian *imati* (Creissels 2010).

In conclusion, possessive HAVE demonstrates both E-HAVE and A-HAVE features. This work refines existing typologies by showing that possessive HAVE need not be distinct from E-HAVE, which in turn need not always indicate a topic possessive.