Accusative Existentials and Possessives

Speakers of Modern Hebrew frequently make use of existential and possessive constructions with the existential marker *yeš* 'there is,' or its negated counterpart *ʔeyn* 'there is not,' followed by the object marker *ʔet* 'ACC' if the NP is definite. When marking possession, speakers mark the possessor with the preposition *le-* 'to'.

In Early Modern Hebrew definite NPs in this construction were unmarked. They could then be interpreted as nominative. The emergence of the construction with an accusative definite argument is attributed to similar constructions in the main contact languages spoken by the first generations of Modern Hebrew speakers, namely Yiddish, Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian.

The earliest example alluding to its use in spoken Hebrew is found in a 1911 prescriptive banishment of the construction (Reshef 2008):

(1) *ʔal tomar:*
     'Don't say:'

ha-yeš	*lexa*	*ʔet*	*ha-davar*	*ha-ze?*
Q-EXIST	to.you	ACC	DEF-thing	DEF-this

'Do you have this thing?'

ʔeyn	*lo*	*ʔet*	*ha-davar*	*ha-ze*
NEG.EXIST	to.him	ACC	DEF-thing	DEF-this

'He does not have this thing.'

ʔemor:
'Say:'

ha-yeš	*lexa*	*ha-davar*	*ha-ze*
Q-EXIST	to.you	DEF-thing	DEF-this

'Do you have this thing?'

ʔeyn	*lo*	*ha-davar*	*ha-ze*
NEG.EXIST	to.him	DEF-thing	DEF-this

'He does not have this thing.'

The earliest example of this construction in written Hebrew comes from a satirical column by Amos Keynan published in the *Haaretz* newspaper between 1950 and 1952 (cited by Reshef 2008):

(2) *ha-zaken haya mabsut nora ve-ʔamar la-caʿir:*
  ʔeyze mazal še-yeš   li ʔotxa
  which luck that-EXIST to.me you.ACC
  'The old man was very glad and said to the young one:
  What luck that I have got you!'

As early as 1929, Hebrew prescriptivists have attributed the appearance of this construction to Yiddish, which marks the possessum by the accusative in the transitive construction with *hobn* 'have' (I. Avineri, cited by Reshef 2008).

Yiddish uses a negated existential marker *nito / ništo* 'there is not' followed by the accusative form of the NP for both nominal and pronominal objects. It is a cognate of German *nicht da* 'not here', and use of the construction is attested in Yiddish literature of the 19th and 20th centuries.

(3) *ništo*   *Berlen*
  NEG.EXIST Berl. ACC
  'Berl is gone' (= disappeared or dead) / 'Berl is not here.'

  ništo   *dem*   *Rebn*
  NEG.EXIST the.ACC.M.SG Rebbe.ACC.SG
  'The Rebbe is gone' (= disappeared or dead) / 'The Rebbe is not here.'

  ništo   *mikh*
  NEG.EXIST me. ACC.SG
  'I'm gone' / 'I'm out of here.'

  haynt ober ništo   *im*   *dem*   *malekh*
  today but NEG.EXIST him. ACC DEF.ACC.SG angel
  'But today he is not there, the angel.'
  (Moyshe Prager, *Antologye fun religyeze lider un dertseylungen*, 1955:139)

The use of the accusative in the negated constructions above appears to be limited to definite NPs, as seen in (3) above, and no example of this construction marking the accusative with an indefinite NP has been found. However, in most cases there is no way to distinguish the accusative from the nominative for indefinite NPs in Yiddish. Only proper names and a very small group of common names mark case distinctions on the noun, and then only in the singular. Case marking is also not found on the negated indefinite article *keyn*, and only the masculine pronoun distinguishes the nominative from the accusative, again in the singular only.

Similar constructions are found in Slavic, which obligatorily marks the genitive form following negation.

(4)   Polish:
        nie ma   *go*   *tu*
        NEG.EXIST   him.GEN.SG   Here
        'He is not here.'

        Russian:
        его   нет   здесь
        yevo   *nyet*   *zdes'*
        him. GEN.SG   NEG.EXIST   Here
        'He is not here.'

        Ukrainian:
        нема   Його   тут
        nema   *yoho*   *tut*
        NEG.EXIST   him.GEN.SG   here
        'He is not here.'

Slavic forms of the genitive singular masculine are historical genitives which came to overlap with the accusative over time, including the function of marking the direct object. That Yiddish speakers interpreted these forms as accusative in adopting the Slavic negated existential constructions may be attributed to both the historical overlap of the Slavic genitive/accusative forms and the loss of the genitive case in Yiddish, a process well attested in many German dialects.

It is unlikely that Modern Hebrew was directly influenced by the Slavic genitive/accusative forms. Rather, early speakers of Modern Hebrew calqued the negated existential construction with the accusative from Yiddish, resulting in constructions as seen in the line from the 1984 song *od nipageš*, by Arik Einstein:

(5)   *yeš*   *kan*   *hakol*   *ʔaval*   *ʔeyn*   *ʔotax*
       EXIST   here   all   but   NEG.EXIST   you.ACC.F.SG
       'There's everything here but there ain't you.'

The construction with the marked definite object expanded to include *positive assertions* of existence (Goldenberg 2013):

(6)   *yeš*   *ʔet*   *ʔele*   *še-yeḵolim*   *la.ʕaśot*   *ha.kol*   *mi-klum*
       EXIST   ACC   those   that-can   do.INF   all   from-nothing
       'There are those who can do all from nothing'

This was likely an internal development derived by analogy with the negative construction, as neither Yiddish nor Slavic have positive constructions of that form.

The existential-possessive construction in Modern Hebrew marks the possessor as a PP with *le-* 'to'. A similar construction is seen in negative assertions of possession in Slavic languages and marked with the genitive. Although Slavic languages have the 'have'-verb (Polish *mieć*, Russian иметь, Ukrainian мати), they can also predicate possession with existential-locative constructions and generally confine the 'have' forms to collocations like "have the honor," "have the right," etc. Polish uses an existential construction with the preposition *u* 'at, by' and a noun or pronoun. However, this form is used to express any kind of involvement, association or relevance, rather than possession. Yiddish has expanded the use of the existential-locative construction in conjunction with the preposition *bay* 'at, by' for predicating possession (Taube 1984).

Despite the above similarities, only the negated existential constructions with object marking (both with and without a PP) in Hebrew bear a resemblance to their equivalents in Slavic and Yiddish. Furthermore, Yiddish lacks negative possessive constructions with the accusative.

Taube concludes that the appearance of existential constructions of positively asserted possession with the accusative in colloquial Modern Hebrew should be seen as the result of internal development. The languages spoken by the first generations of Modern Hebrew speakers, namely Yiddish, Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian where similar constructions are attested, most likely enhanced the expansion of these constructions in modern Hebrew. Despite the observation that Palestinian dialects of Arabic also have similar constructions (Goldenberg 2013, citing Rosenhouse 2004 and Sadka 2009; see also Henkin 1994), Taube does not include Spoken Arabic in the list of possible contact languages. The vast majority of the Jewish population in Palestine during the emergence of Modern Hebrew were not native speakers of Arabic (Bachi 1956); rather they were native speakers of Yiddish and at least one Slavic language.

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