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Two genitive constructions of Old Babylonian

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Abstract
The paper shows that there is a pattern in the distribution of synthetic (*šēp šarrim* "the king's foot") vs. analytical (*kaspum ša awīlim* "the boss's money") genitive constructions in Old Babylonian. The choice depends on the lexical feature of head nouns known as (in)alienability. Old Babylonian kinship and body part terms, as well as some other substantives, are "inalienable", which means they take only the synthetic construction. All other Old Babylonian nouns are "alienable", which means they admit both the synthetic and the analytical construction (*kasap tamkārī* and *kaspum ša tamkārī* "the merchants' money"). In the latter case, there is no general rule to predict the choice, yet in certain cases the two constructions display a non-random frequency distribution.
Keywords: Akkadian language, Old Babylonian, Noun phrase, Genitive, Possession, Alienability

1. The problem and the research history

As is well known, OB has two genitive constructions with dependent substantives. In the first, the head assumes the bound form, while the immediately following dependent takes the genitive case (Ø-GEN): *šēp šarrim* "the king's foot". In the second, the head has the free form, while the dependent is introduced by the preposition *ša* and takes the genitive (*ša*-GEN): *kaspum ša awīlim* "the boss's money".[2]

The variation between Ø-GEN and *ša*-GEN constructions in OB was first studied by Ungnad (1904–05: 40–44) for the Code of Hammurabi. Ungnad showed that, in the simplest kind of NP (i.e. the NP comprising only two constituents, a head substantive and a dependent substantive), Ø-GEN greatly outnumbered *ša*-GEN, yet he did not attempt to describe their distribution. Ungnad also showed that *ša*-GEN rather than Ø-GEN was mostly used in complex NPs – those with more than two immediate constituents, i.e. with multiple heads or dependents.

1 The research has been supported by RFBR grant No. 16-04-00250a.
2 The grammatical tradition (see, e.g., Huehnergard 2011: 363) often refers to this *ša* as a "determinative pronoun", for historical reasons.

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Little research has been done on the subject since Ungnad 1904–05.[3] The available descriptions reproduce, for the most part, Ungnad's findings.[4] For example, a widely used textbook of OB Akkadian focuses on complex NPs and pays little attention to the simplest kind of NP.[5]

In this paper, we describe the distribution of the Ø-GEN and the *ša*-GEN constructions in OB. The corpus of the study consists of OB letters, because, of all genres, letters replicate the spoken OB vernacular most faithfully. Our research is based on frequency counts gleaned from *c*. 6,200 OB letters available in two databases, ARCHIBAB (www.archibab.fr) and OBTC (www.klinopis.cz/nobtc).[6] We have counted the tokens of each of the two constructions for certain frequent heads. We shall begin with simple NPs (i.e. those containing only the head and a substantive dependent), and then proceed to NPs with more constituents.

We study only those genitive constructions in which both the head and the dependent are genuine substantives freely combined to form a genitive NP.[7] We do not consider heads of compound nouns such as *bēl awātim* "litigant" and *mār šiprim* "messenger", or noun-derived prepositions such as *ina libbi* "in(side)" or *ša qāt*(*i*) "under control of" (Huehnergard 2011: 99–101; Mayer 2011). Since compounds and freely formed NPs are notoriously difficult to tell apart (Haspelmath 2002: 154–61), we count among compounds the CAD entries with lemmata such as "*abu* A in *bīt abi*" (CAD A/1 73), as well as the lemmata from Huehnergard's and Mayer's studies. We list these items, where available, at the end of our Appendix entries.

2. The thesis

We start from our observation that certain OB substantives take only Ø-GEN dependents, while others take both Ø-GEN and *ša*-GEN. Thus, in the corpus, *mārat* PN "PN's daughter" is the only way to render the notion, which means **mārtum ša* PN is ungrammatical. Other head nouns admit both the synthetic and the analytical construction, e.g. *eqel* PN and *eqlum ša* PN "PN's field".[8]

3 What we mean here is studies of OB. As for other Akkadian varieties, each of them merits a study of its own. None of the available corpus-specific grammars explain the distribution of the two genitive constructions in simple NPs.

4 A few valuable observations were made by Albrecht Goetze, Wolfram von Soden and Bert Kouwenberg, see below notes 23, 25 and 19. Yet they touch upon only a small portion of the evidence.

5 Huehnergard 2011: 363. It posits that *ša*-GEN "may occur in any situation in which the bound form is used", which, as we are going to show, is not true for OB.

6 These databases embrace about 97 per cent of all OB letters published by 31/12/2017. We publish the evidence supporting our claims as an online Appendix to the paper.

7 i.e. we do not include in the study those NPs in which one of the constituents is an infinitive (e.g. *kašād bēlīya* "my lord's coming" or *ṭuppum ša ḫamāṭim* "urgent letter"). We also exclude NPs with an adjective as the head (e.g. *damqam īnim* "the one with beautiful eyes").

8 In the corpus, there are no frequent substantives (counting over 20 tokens) that take *ša*-GEN to the exclusion of Ø-GEN.

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Linguistic literature describes this kind of distribution as the alienability contrast (or "alienability split") between inalienable vs. alienable possession.[9] In languages with an alienability split, there are two adnominal possessive constructions displaying a certain distribution. In particular, a closed set of substantives used as NP heads can be compatible with only one of the constructions. Substantives belonging to this group are traditionally referred to as inalienable nouns. Substantives that are able to head the other construction are referred to as alienable nouns.[10] The second construction (incompatible with "inalienable" nouns) is often more complex, i.e. it requires more coding material. This is, in particular, the case with OB.

The term alienability is misleading if it is to be taken literally as indicating a feature of the referents (such as physical or legal "alienability") or an intrinsic semantic trait of the nouns in question. According to the traditional view, the semantic core of inalienable nouns consists of relational nouns, i.e. nouns with an obligatory argument, such as, e.g., "brother" and other kinship terms.[11] The bulk of inalienable nouns usually fit into a few easily definable semantic groups, though there is no rule to predict how a given noun will be treated in a given language that has two genitive constructions. To sum up: contemporary linguistics uses "alienability" as a purely syntactic description, for want of a better and semantically non-committal word.

Thus, (in)alienability is a lexical feature that must be indicated in lexicons, including a future dictionary of OB. In other words, a good dictionary must state explicitly with which genitive construction(s) the given frequent noun is attested.

3. Ø-GEN only: inalienable nouns

In OB, we have found four semantic groups of inalienable nouns and a few frequent inalienable nouns that do not fit neatly into clear-cut groups. Note that all of them take only Ø-GEN, whatever their meaning in a given NP, literal or metaphoric, and whatever the semantic nature of the bond between them and their dependents in a given case.[12]

9 Readers interested in cross-linguistic research into adnominal possessive constructions will want to consult, in particular, Nichols 1988; Heine 1997: 10–16, 172–83; Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2001; and Haspelmath 2017. On inalienable vs. alienable possession in West Semitic languages, see Diem 1986. Since possession splits in West Semitic and OB arose independently, their comparison can be only of typological interest. For a discussion of (in)alienability in literary OB outside the genitive constructions we study, see Wasserman 2003: 14–16, 29–57.

10 Speculatively, the choice of possessive construction may depend not only on the head but also on the semantic bond between the head and the dependent. Thus, in some languages, "her (breast) milk" may be expressed differently from "her (store-bought) milk" (Nichols 1988: 565 f.). Yet, in a dead language with its limited corpus, this kind of evidence is scarce. See section 4 on *eqlum* "plot".

11 See Haspelmath 2017: 199 for a critical discussion of this stance.

12 Compare, e.g., *šītat* ŠE*e* "rest of the grain" (MHET 1/1 73: 14) with *šītat našpakim* "rest (of the grain) in the store" (AbB 7 89: 7).

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In languages with an alienability split, it is kinship and body part terms that most consistently behave as inalienable nouns.[13] This is what happens in OB: simple genitive constructions headed by terms for kinship and body parts take only Ø-GEN.[14] Among hundreds of genitive constructions headed by kinship terms such as *abum* "father" (10 tokens), *ummum* "mother" (8), *mārum* "son" (681),[15] *mārtum* "daughter" (81), *aḫum* "brother" (31), *aḫātum* "sister" (10), and *aššatum* "wife" (47), we have found no indisputable *ša*-GEN.[16] The rule also applies to metaphoric meanings of kinship terms, such as *mār ālim* "resident of the city". As for body parts, we have checked the corpus for *īnum* "eye" (22), *libbum* "heart" (157), *qaqqadum* "head" (43), *qātum* "hand" (46), *šaptum* "lip" (19), and *šēpum* "foot" (46), including their metaphoric meanings, such as *šaptum* "utterance" or *libbum* "middle". All of these appear only with Ø-GEN.[17]

Part-whole quantifiers are also expected to be inalienable nouns.[18] In the corpus, only *bāmtum* "half" (13), *šapiltum* "rest, remainder" (32) and *šittum* "rest, remainder" (46) are frequent enough to be considered. Each of them heads Ø-GEN only. For other part-whole quantifiers, such as *muttatum* "half" (9), *gamartum* "totality" (6) and *šaluštum* "third" (7), we have also found only Ø-GEN, yet these nouns are rare relative to the first group, so one cannot be certain about their behaviour as heads of genitive constructions.

Another tightly-knit OB group of inalienable nouns consists of agent nouns derived from transitive verbs. These deverbal substantives take dependents that correspond to the direct objects of the source verb. Agent nouns derived from transitive verbs according to the productive *pāris* (*muparris, mušapris*) or *paris* (for certain semantically static verbs) patterns always head Ø-GEN encoding the semantic object, if they take a substantive complement at all.[19] Apart from the frequent compounds *nāši biltim* "tribute bearer", *ālik idim* "travel companion" and *rakbūt imērim* "donkey riders", what remains in the corpus for a meaningful frequency count is *wābilum* "carrier" (43 tokens). Besides, the Prologue of the Hammurabi Code contains a good selection of non-stock instances such as *mukammer nuḫšim u ṭuḫdim* "the one who heaps abundance and plenty", etc.

13 See the references in n. 9. Note that even these two groups of heads are not universally treated as inalienable across languages (Nichols 1988: 572).

14 For inalienable heads, the grammatical number does not influence the choice of the construction, therefore the number of tokens we indicate is the sum total of sing. and pl. forms. For alienable heads in pl. see section 4 below.

15 In this study, frequency counts are to be understood as approximate, because not all tokens (e.g. if partly broken) are philologically reliable.

16 For a few philologically dubious cases, see the Appendix s.v. *aḫum* (1 token), *aššatum* (1 token) and *mārum* (3 tokens).

17 Some derived senses of *qātum* do permit *ša*-GEN, see the Appendix *s.v.*

18 "Part-whole and/or spatial relations" are the third most frequent group of inalienable nouns in the world's languages (Nichols 1988: 572). In OB, spatial relations are most frequently expressed with metaphors of body parts (see above), while terms for parts of material objects (other than body parts) are not frequent enough to be dealt with in this study. Part-whole quantifiers are what remains suitable for a description.

19 As already suggested in Kouwenberg 2010: 204, n. 29.

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For the rest of the OB lexicon, we have found a few more substantives that head only Ø-GEN. We have taken into account only very frequent nouns, since working with small samples may turn out to be misleading: the larger the sample, the more chances there are to come across *ša*-GEN with head nouns that select Ø-GEN in the majority of cases, see below on *bītum* "house(hold)" and *ṭuppum* "tablet, letter".

***Bēlum* "lord"** heads 73 tokens of Ø-GEN as against no single instance of *ša*-GEN. However, *wardum* "servant" and *šarrum* "king" behave as heads of NPs unlike *bēlum*, although they also express relative social standings (see section 4).

***Šulmum* "well-being"** heads 147 Ø-GEN constructions as against no single *ša*-GEN. "Nominalizations", "abstractions", "physical and mental states" are treated as inalienable nouns in a number of languages (Nichols 1988: 584–94; Heine 1997: 10). However, OB does not have a general rule of the kind: *purussûm* "decision" takes both constructions (see section 4).

Šumum "name, fame" always heads Ø-GEN (25 tokens). Substantives for "name" are often treated as inalienable in languages with split possession (Heine 1997: 10).

4. Both Ø-GEN and *ša*-GEN are used: alienable nouns

The other OB substantives permit both genitive constructions. The examples below show that, for certain nouns as heads, the use of one construction over another does not influence the meaning of the NP in question, while the reasons for selecting either Ø-GEN or *ša*-GEN remain opaque:

> *bēlī ana* PN_1 *u* PN_2 *lišpuram-ma* (…) ***erṣet mātim*** *ša qātīšunu lišērišū ša tašpuram* (…) *ana* PN_1 *u* PN_2 *udanninamma aštapram* (…) ***erṣetam ša mātim*** *ša qātīšunu ušerrešū* "'May my lord write to PN_1 and PN_2 (…) so that they provide for cultivating **the land of the district** under their command,' this is what you wrote to me. (…) I have written to PN_1 and PN_2 in strong language. (…) They will provide for cultivating **the district's land** under their command". (AbB 4 19: 7–22)

> *aššum* ***eqlim ša*** $\mathbf{PN_1}$ *ša ina berītim ṣabtu unnedukkī ina amārīka* ***eqel*** $\mathbf{PN_1}$ *mala ina berītim ibaššû ana* PN_2 *idin* "As for **the plot of** $\mathbf{PN_1}$, which he holds in the midland, as soon as you see my letter, give $\mathbf{PN_1}$**'s plot**, as much as there is in the midland, to PN_2". (AbB 13 2: 4–11)

> *mār* PN_1 *ša* GN PN_2 *mārī* ***taḫḫu ša*** $\mathbf{PN_3}$ *maṣṣar ekallim ana qinnāzim iṣbat-ma iptād* (…) PN_2 […] *mār* PN_4 *ana qinnāzim ul šaṭer ana* ***taḫḫi*** $\mathbf{PN_3}$ *šaṭer* "The son of PN_1 from GN has drafted PN_2 my son – he is **a substitute for** $\mathbf{PN_3}$ the palace guard – into a work unit and has confined him. (…) PN_2 […] the son of PN_4 has not been assigned to a work unit; he has been registered as $\mathbf{PN_3}$**'s substitute**". (AbB 13 46: 6–9, 13–6)

However, we have found a few quantitative regularities in the distribution of the two constructions. Certain head nouns prefer one of the constructions, though they may take the other one as well. In some cases, the explanation is semantic,

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Table 1. The ratio of Ø-GEN to *ša*-GEN for certain frequent head nouns of OB

	Ø-GEN	*ša*-GEN
alpum "ox"	3	16
alpū "oxen"	3	31
bītum "house(hold)"	296	8
bītātum "house(hold)s"	13	–
eqlum "field"	210	91
eqlētum "fields"	7	4
kakkum "weapon"	2	16
kakkū "weapons"	1	3
kirûm "garden"[20]	9	11
purussûm "decision"[21]	3	7
šarrum "king"	65	30
šarr(*ān*)*ū* "kings"[22]	3	46
ṭuppum "tablet, letter"	322	26
ṭuppātum "tablets, letters"	30	9
wardum "servant"	90	11
wardū "servants"	59	41

in other cases it is related to a feature of the OB nominal inflection, while sometimes the reason remains unclear to us. Let us consider the ratio of Ø-GEN to *ša*-GEN for a few frequent head nouns (Table 1).

In some of the above cases, the distribution may have to do with the kind of semantic bond between the head and the dependent. For example, "plot of (a given grain)" is almost always expressed via Ø-GEN (40 vs. 1), while "palace land" is always *eqel ekallim* (26 tokens in the corpus). One is tempted to surmise that non-referential dependents (i.e. those expressing a feature of the head rather than referring to an individual object) favour Ø-GEN.[23] To check this suggestion, further study is needed.

Bītum "house(hold)", with almost 300 tokens of Ø-GEN vs. only 8 of *ša*-GEN, is a borderline case between alienable and inalienable nouns.[24] Note that four or five of the eight *ša*-GEN tokens have locative arguments ("house in …"), while this usage is not reliably attested for Ø-GEN headed by *bītum*. However, *eqlum* does not have the same distribution: "field of (an owner)" (except the palace) and "field (in a location)" display comparable frequency of the two constructions, 93 Ø-GEN vs. 69 *ša*-GEN, and 44 Ø-GEN vs. 27 *ša*-GEN respectively.

In other cases, the explanation is related to the inflectional morphology. With masculine plural nouns as heads, OB prefers *ša*-GEN, even for the nouns which,

20 Only singular forms are attested as heads of genitive constructions.
21 Only singular forms are attested as heads of genitive constructions.
22 Both *šarrū* and *šarrānū* are attested as plural forms (see, e.g., ARM 28 1: 11'f. for *šarrū* and FM 6 7: 10 f. for *šarrānū*), but in most cases the form is written as LUGAL.MEŠ, so the actual pl. shape cannot be recovered.
23 As was suggested in Goetze 1947: 75 f. See Nichols 1988: 566 f. for cross-linguistic parallels.
24 "House(hold)" belongs to "culturally basic possessed items" which are treated as inalienable nouns in many languages (Nichols 1988: 572).

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in the singular, take Ø-GEN more frequently than *ša*-GEN. The example of *šarrum* in the above table is particularly telling. The reason may be that Ø-GEN is a double-marked construction: the head takes the bound form, the dependent takes the genitive case. If the bound form is phonologically indistinguishable from the free-standing form, speakers may try to avoid a homonymy of the two forms by using *ša*-GEN. This is the case with masculine plural heads: it is the only paradigmatic slot wherein the bound form is identical to the free-standing form.[25]

For the rest, Table 1 shows that various heads display uneven distribution of the two forms. At the present stage of our research, this observation resists a cogent interpretation. The apparently indiscriminate use of both Ø-GEN and ša-GEN with certain nouns may have a diachronic reason, but this cannot be assumed without a study of other Akkadian varieties.

5. Complex noun phrases

This section is meant as an improved restatement of what was described in Ungnad 1904–05.

Ša-GEN has to be used whenever there intervenes, between the head and its substantive argument, a bound pronoun, another head, another genitive dependent, an adjective, or an appositive substantive. The following examples illustrate this point:

- A bound pronoun intervening: *šībī**šša** ša kaspim u* ŠE*im mādūtim* "numerous witnesses against her concerning silver and barley" (AbB 9 49: 24 f.)
- Another head intervening: *ina amātim **u wardī** ša bītīša* "among the slaves and slave-girls of her household" (AbB 9 49: 9).[26]
- Another genitive dependent intervening: *ṭuppi **šarri** ša ta''ittim* "the king's letter with a warning" (CTMMA 1 69: 5).[27]
- An adjective intervening: *wardum **ṣeḫrum** ša bēlīya* "a young servant of my lord" (ARM 13 147: 25).
- An appositive substantive intervening: *eqlum **mērešum** ša ekallim* "arable land of the palace" (ARM 27 100: 5).

Within a NP, an attributive adjective can either precede or follow the dependent substantive:

- *ṭēmam gamram ša* ŠE*em* "a complete report concerning the grain" (ARM 27 101: 29 f.)
- *ṭēm kirîm šuāti gamram* "a complete report concerning this garden" (AbB 4 13: 15)

25 Both the observation concerning the m.pl. heads and its explanation were suggested by von Soden (GAG §138g).

26 For inalienable heads within this collocation, the evidence of letters is nil, but we have found an example in a purchase contract: *ina mārī u aḫḫī ša* PN_1 *u* PN_2 "among the sons and brothers of PN_1 and PN_2" (Archibab 1 6: 16 f.).We have also found an example of this construction with *bītum* "house", which strongly prefers Ø-GEN (see the Appendix, s.v. note 2).

27 Note that *šarrum* and *ta''ittum* both depend on *ṭuppum*, since "*šarrum ša ta''ittim*" makes no sense.

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- *alpum marûm reštûm ša igisêm* "a fattened upper-quality ox for the celebration" (ARM 14 5: 5)
- *alpam ša ištеat bilat kaspim marâm* "a fattened ox worth one talent of silver" (AbB 3 114: 5'' f.).

In the above examples, all the head nouns are alienable. For inalienable heads, the evidence of our corpus is scarce, yet both constructions appear in OB:

- *ana aḫḫī* PN *ṣeḫḫerūtim* "to PN's younger brothers" (ARM 14 16: 22 f.)
- *mārum rēštûm ša Ekur* "the first-born son of the Ekur temple" (CH Epilogue: L 83 f.).

We do not have an explanation for the choice of construction with attributive adjectives. For the set phrase *ṭēmum gamrum* "complete report", the two constructions are equally frequent (see the Appendix *s.v.*).

As for genitive constructions with more than one substantive dependent, our parsing of the corpus shows that these follow the same pattern as simple genitive constructions.[28] With inalienable nouns, only Ø-GEN is admissible, e.g.:[29]

> *šulum halṣim u errētim* "the safety of the district and the weirs" (ARM 14 20: 9 f.)

With alienable nouns, both constructions can be used:[30]

> *aššum eqel* PN_1 *u* PN_2 "concerning the plot of PN_1 and PN_2" (AbB 4 81: 43)
> *ana kirîm ša* PN_1 *u* PN_2 "to the garden of PN_1 and PN_2" (AbB 14 69: 14 f.)

Ø-GEN within this collocation is well attested (e.g. there are eight tokens for *eqlum* "field"), but the low frequency of both constructions does not permit us to recognize a pattern.

Conclusion

The distribution of Ø-GEN vs. *ša*-GEN in the simple NP across all frequent OB substantives is a first desideratum for further research. Besides, as is well known, the language of OB letters is not homogeneous: it displays local varieties (or "dialects"), and it changes over time. Yet, at the approximation level of the present inquiry, we have found no dialectal differences in the distribution of the two constructions, which nonetheless does not mean they did not exist in real life. Further, this distribution must be studied for all major varieties of vernacular Akkadian, i.e. Sargonic, Middle Babylonian, Neo-Babylonian, as well as Old Assyrian, Middle Assyrian, and Neo-Assyrian. This kind of study may provide a diachronic explanation for some of the facts described above.

28 Thus it is not true that *ša*-GEN "is preferred … or must be used … when there is more than one governed noun" (Huehnergard 2011: 363).

29 See more examples in the Appendix, s.v. *bēlum, īnum, šaptum, qaqqadum, qātum, šaluštum, šēpum, šulmum*, *šumum*, *wābilum*. We have found no counter-examples.

30 See more examples in the Appendix, s.v. *bītum*, *eqlum*, *kakkum*, *ṭuppum*.

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Abbreviations

AbB	Altbabylonische Briefe in Umschrift und Übersetzung
ARM	Archives royales de Mari
CH	Code of Hammurabi
CTMMA	Cuneiform Texts in the Metropolitan Museum of Art
FM	Florilegium Marianum
GAG	W. von Soden, *Grundriß der akkadischen Grammatik* (von Soden 1995)
NP	Noun phrase
OB	Old Babylonian
PN	Personal name

Supplementary material – Appendix

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X19000648.

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