

UDC 811.161

DOI <https://doi.org/10.28925/2412-2491.2026.267>

POSSESSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN EAST POLISSIAN DIALECTS: EAST SLAVIC CONTEXT

Salvatore Del Gaudio

Section of Slavistics, Department of Humanities (DIPSUM),
University of Salerno (Italy)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8441-749X>
sdelgaudio@unisa.it



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

Dialectal morphology and, to a lesser extent, syntax have been relatively well documented in Ukrainian and, more broadly, in East Slavic dialectology. Notwithstanding this achievement, certain morphosyntactic characteristics have received limited attention, particularly from a cross-linguistic and typological perspective. One of these aspects is the encoding of possession in East Polissian (or northeastern) Ukrainian dialects. Possession, as universal, is a fundamental grammatical category, yet its diverse realizations across dialects can shed light on both historical developments and typological patterns within Slavic and European languages. This study addresses this point by examining frequent strategies that East Polissian dialects employ to convey possessive relations.

Drawing on data derived from a personal corpus of dialectal speech, complemented by other primary sources, the analysis focuses on the most salient possessive constructions. Among these, external possessive constructions—based on the ESSE ('be') locative model—emerge as a particularly prominent feature. The findings reveal both continuity with other East Slavic varieties and localized innovations that distinguish East Polissian from other Ukrainian and East Slavic dialect groups.

By providing an account of possessive constructions, this research not only fills a descriptive lacuna in East Slavic dialectology but also contributes to typological debates on possession and grammatical encoding more generally. The results have implications for a more comprehensive understanding of internal variation within Ukrainian, as well as for a more balanced areal-typological assessment of East Slavic within the broader framework of European languages.

Keywords: *possessive constructions, external possession, dialectology, East Slavic, Ukrainian, language typology.*

Дель Гаудіо, Сальваторе. Посесивні конструкції у східнополіських говірках: східнослов'янський контекст. Діалектну морфологію та, меншою мірою, синтаксис східнослов'янських мов добре вивчено, зокрема, в українській діалектології. Проте певні морфосинтаксичні особливості залишаються поза увагою, особливо з порівняльно-типологічного погляду. Одним із таких аспектів є кодування посесивності (присвійності) в східнополіських (північно-східних) говірках української мови. Посесивність як універсальна граматична категорія має різноманітні реалізації в різних говорах, що дозволяє висвітлити історичний розвиток і типологічні

закономірності слов'янських та європейських мов. Це дослідження частково заповнює прогалину в описі посесивних реляцій у східнополіських говірках, аналізуючи мовні засоби їх кодування. На основі даних із особистого діалектного корпусу, доповнених іншими першоджерелами, аналіз зосереджено на найхарактерніших посесивних конструкціях.

Особливу увагу приділено зовнішнім посесивним конструкціям, що ґрунтуються на локативній моделі типу «ESSE». Результати дослідження свідчать як про спадкоємність із іншими східнослов'янськими діалектами, так і про локальні новації, що відрізняють східнополіські говірки від інших діалектних груп східнослов'янських мов, зокрема української.

Це дослідження не лише заповнює прогалину в описовій діалектології східнослов'янських мов, а й удосконалює типологічне розуміння посесивності та її граматичного кодування загалом. Крім того, отримані результати сприяють більш ґрунтовному оцінюванню внутрішньої варіативності української мови і дозволяють здійснити точнішу ареально-типологічну оцінку східнослов'янських мов у ширшому європейському контексті.

***Ключові слова:** посесивні конструкції, зовнішня посесивність, діалектологія, східнослов'янські мови, українська мова, мовна типологія.*

Introduction

The notion of possession and the ways to express it in many world languages have been widely dealt with since the early pioneering works of the late 1970s. This topic gained prominence within typological linguistics by the late 1990s. Over the past three decades, the volume of scholarly publications addressing different facets of possession and its formal codification in diverse languages has increased considerably so that it is no longer feasible to encompass all relevant issues within a single article.¹ Consequently, the theoretical framework presented in this paper relies on a substantial body of research that is pertinent to our specific discussion, while acknowledging that numerous equally significant works—particularly those from a purely notional standpoint—are not directly addressed here.

With regard to Slavic languages, and particularly East Slavic languages, in addition to Alexander Isačenko's pioneering work (1974), a series of fundamental contributions have appeared since the early 2000s.² Moreover, while various aspects of possession and its linguistic codification—such as internal versus external possession, alienable versus inalienable possession, datives of possession, and locational patterns—have been thoroughly examined in the specialist literature, particularly with respect to standard languages, these typological approaches have been less frequently applied to the territorial dimension of language variation, and

¹ On the concept of possession and its theoretical implication, see Seiler (1983) and earlier works; Clark (1978). Further milestones on possession as a universal, cross-linguistic category and ensuing constructions are Činčlej (1990); Heine (1997); König and Haspelmath (1997) and related contributions (cf. Del Gaudio 1998; 2017, p. 74); Koptjevskaja-Tamm (2003); Stassen (2009) etc.

² In this context we can mention Andrii Danylenko (2002; 2005); Jasmine Grković-Major (2011); Federica Mazzitelli (2015; 2017) etc.

thus to diatopic variation. Specifically, while Slavic dialects, and particularly northeastern Ukrainian (or Eastern Polissian) dialects, have been extensively documented in terms of traditional morphology and, to a lesser extent, syntax, their typological peculiarities have received little attention.

In this perspective, it is both timely and necessary to investigate the semantic-syntactic strategies for expressing possession and the use of possessive constructions within these dialects, as well as the broader typological features that characterize them. Such an examination will contribute to a more balanced linguistic-typological understanding of the East Slavic dialect continuum, particularly within the framework of East Slavic and European languages. Thus, the present study aims to explore the most frequently used possessive constructions in northeastern Ukrainian dialects.

After a methodological outline, in the ensuing discussion we first present the most common strategies for encoding possession in (East) Slavic languages, with particular focus on Ukrainian. Successively, we illustrate and analyze the realization of possessive constructions in the dialectal area under investigation.

Methodology

The decision to apply linguistic-typological criteria to the analysis of dialectal data represents a relatively recent development in our research approach. As a result, we have yet to establish a fully refined methodology specifically designed for this purpose. This framework will be essential for systematically categorizing and interpreting the features of the dialects under examination.

The data presented in the following sections have been derived from different sources, reflecting both traditional and contemporary methods of dialectological research. First, a substantial portion of examples draws on our personal fieldwork carried out in the former Ripky district (north-west of Černihiv), which serves as the primary foundation for analysis. Secondly, due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, we have used remote elicitation techniques, an adaptation necessitated by the inability to physically access certain villages located in the northern parts of the Černihiv and Sumy regions. Thirdly, we have drawn on pre-existing dialectal collections (Ukr. *xrestomatiji*), which provide valuable historical and regional insights. In addition, other primary sources, most notably the *Linguistic Atlas of the Ukrainian Language* (AUM 1984–2001), have been consulted to cross-reference and validate the linguistic features under investigation.

Further corroboration of the use and frequency of specific constructions has been sought through informal consultations with colleagues working in adjacent

dialectal regions. These collaborative exchanges serve to enrich the data set, offering complementary perspectives that further contextualize the dialectal features in question.

The dialectal utterances analyzed herein predominantly reflect the speech patterns of the older, largely non-mobile generation, which, prior to the Russian invasion on 24 February 2022, had long been settled in the rural East Polissian areas. This group of speakers, characterized by minimal formal education, offers a unique linguistic perspective, as their speech exhibits features that are more stable and resistant to the influences of external linguistic and social forces. Importantly, these speakers represent the last vestiges of a stable rural community, whose linguistic practices may now be subject to significant transformation due to the disruptions caused by the ongoing conflict.

Results and Discussion

Much has been written on the concept of possession, the difficulties of defining it linguistically, and the various types of possession (e.g. prototypical possession, among others). The semantics underlying the multifaceted relationships of possession (possessive constructions) can overlap with, or be interrelated to, other meanings, thus further complicating the task of defining the concept (cf. Seiler 1983, p. 1; Heine 1997, p. 1; Stassen 2009, p. 10). For this reason, and given the scope of this paper, we will refrain from engaging in philosophical or semantic analyses of the very essence of this notion.

In general terms, Possession indicates a relation between someone who possesses something and the thing he/she possesses. More specifically we can say that possessive constructions describe the relationship between two entities: 1) the possessing entity or *Possessor*; 2) and the possessed entity or *Possessum*.³ Possession is considered a universal of language (Seiler 1983, p. 11). Three primary dimensions of possession are generally acknowledged: 1) predicative possession; 2) attributive possession and 3) external possession.

European languages employ a variety of grammatical, lexical, and semantic categories —such as connectors, classifiers, case affixes, locative markers, verbs etc.—to express the relationship between two entities: *Possessor* and *Possessum*. This semantic-grammatical and lexical relationships are usually defined “possessive constructions”. This definition is a useful operational instrument for analyzing the

³ On the use of terminology, see: Seiler (2001, p. 39).

constructions in question. The range of semantic properties attributed to possession often depends on the theoretical approach adopted by the researcher.

Among the different ways of encoding the possession relationship, the most common in East Slavic, as in many other European languages, are internal and external possessive constructions (EPCs). Other means of encoding possession include the use of HABERE ‘have’ relation which may be subject to certain semantic restrictions depending on the specific characteristics of each (East) Slavic language, as well as the possessive dative constructions.

In internal possessive constructions (IPCs), both the possessor and the possessum are encoded within the same noun phrase. In these constructions, the possessor bears the formal marker of the possessive relation (König, Haspelmath 1997, p. 1; Del Gaudio 1998, p. 1), as illustrated in the following examples:

1. **Ukrainian**

knyžka včytel’-ja

book teacher-Gen.

‘The teacher’s book’

2. **Russian**

ručka advokat-a

pen lawyer-Gen.

‘The lawyer’s pen’

3. **Belarusian**

Rovar brat-a

Bike-NOM.SG.M brother-GEN.SG.M

‘The brother’s bike’.

Internal possessive constructions, at least in some inflected languages, do not present significant formal (grammatical and, to some extent, semantic) problems, as they explicitly encode possession. Such formal constructions (which may be considered somewhat "bookish" from a dialectological viewpoint) do not exhibit substantial diastatic or diatopic variation, except for their frequency of use, which is not assessed here due to the lack of specific data.

The encoding of predicative possession—both internal and external—in non-standard East Slavic varieties, particularly at the dialectal level, may reveal its territorial or areal specificity.

In East Polissian dialects, particularly those spoken along the southeastern Belarusian and southwestern Russian political borders, external possessive constructions (EPCs) can be primarily realized in three ways:

- a) The possessor can be marked by the dative case;
- b) The possessor is part of a prepositional phrase (PP), formed with a spatial-locative preposition governed by the genitive case, such as *u* (or its allophonic variant *v*) + Possessor-GEN;
- c) An implicit construction where the possessor is not overtly expressed and the possessum appears in an object noun phrase.

An EPC with the possessor encoded by the dative (a) can be illustrated in example 4:

4. matka myje holavu dytjati / xlopcu⁴
mother-NOM.SG.F wash-3SG.PRES head-ACC.SG.F child-DAT.SG.N
'The mother washes the child's head (hair)'

The most common and widespread EPCs in East Polissian dialects are the spatial-locative constructions (also referred to as the 'adessive' construction, cf. Finnish and other Uralic languages). As previously noted, (b), this construction involves the preposition *u*, which indicates location, followed by a possessor marked in the genitive case and a possessed object in the nominative.⁵ This can be schematically represented as: PP (PREP) + Possessor (GEN) + (AUX) + Possessum (NOM). For example:

5. U m'en'e [m'ɛn'ɛ] je knižka / l'esap'ed
[l'ɛsa'p'ɛd]
at-PREP me-1SG.GEN be-3SG.PRES book-NOM.SG.F / bike-NOM.SG.M
'I have a book / a bike'

⁴ Both forms are interesting. In the first instance we have a neuter noun with the suffix *-jat-* (< Proto-Slavic **et*; standard Ukrainian IV declension of *-a* (*-ja*) nouns). In the second one we note the typical dispalatalization of *-c* before vowels. (Del Gaudio 2025a: 293-294).

⁵ We do not consider here potential semantic restrictions on the possessor, possessum, or verb, as this falls beyond the scope of the present study. For an overview of semantic restrictions on EPCs in East Slavic and other European standard languages, see Del Gaudio (1998, pp. 38-42), based on Cienki (1993, pp. 77-79). Also, cf. König and Haspelmath (1997, pp. 529-539).

6. U jaho [ja'ho] ŭzroslyje [w'zroslije] d'et'i [d'et'i]
at-prep he-GEN.SG.M grown-up-NOM.PL child-NOM.PL
'he has grown-up children'

In Example 5, the auxiliary *to be* in the third person singular is overtly expressed for semantic and/or pragmatic reasons (e.g., to convey emphasis or focus). In the second instance (Example 6), the auxiliary is omitted.⁶

The same EPC structural pattern is also observed in the past tense, both in affirmative and negative sentences.⁷ For example:

7. u m'en'e buli(y) kury
[u m'ie'n'e bul'i/ɪ 'kuri]
at-PREP me-SG.GEN be-3PL.PAST hen-NOM.PL.F
'I had hens'

8. u men'e nje buli kur
[u m'ie'n'e n'e bul'i 'kur-Ø]
at-PREP me-SG.GEN not-NEG be-3PL.PAST hen-GEN.PL
'I had no hens'.

As illustrated in (8), negation of possession in the past tense is prepositional in nature and involves the past tense form of the verb *to be*. Based on the data collected thus far, this appears to be the only available construction within the examined dialectal area.

For the present tense, however, the parallel construction with the auxiliary verb *HABERE*, which is standard in Ukrainian—such as the construction *maty* have-AUX.INF + *possessum* in the accusative (e.g., *ja maju mašynu* '(I) have a car')—appears to be entirely absent in the dialects under study. This construction was not observed during the preliminary fieldwork, which involved participant observation and, where appropriate, elicitation techniques, nor was it observed during the subsequent phase of audio recording and transcription of dialectal material.

⁶ It should be noted that the pronominal forms are specific in most of the local dialects spoken near the Belarusian border. These forms often coincide with either standard Belarusian or other nonstandard varieties of Belarusian. For further details, see Del Gaudio (2025a, pp. 315–324).

⁷ This morphosyntactic consistency was also highlighted by Koptjevskaja-Tamm (2004, p. 106), who observed a stable grammatical framework that permits minimal variation across different temporal forms.

The same pattern is also evident in the dialects spoken on both the Belarusian and Russian sides of the border, which, within chronological limits and despite some local variations, must have formed and, still to a certain extent do, a dialectal continuum. Therefore, unlike standard Ukrainian and, to some degree, Belarusian—which can express possession through two, mainly semantically equivalent, syntactic constructions—Ukrainian border dialects, along with most of the eastern Polissian dialectal area, appear to favour the ESSE model (with an external possessor) characteristic of standard Russian. The absence or, at least the rareness, of the HABERE model has been lately confirmed by dialectologists working in neighbouring areas.⁸

It should be also noted that spatial-locative EPCs are common to all three standard East Slavic languages, compare: Ukr. *u mene je dočka* (<у мене є дочка>); Rus. *u menja est' dočka* (<у меня есть дочка>); Belarusian *u mjanе ёsc' dačka* (<у мяне ёсць дачка>), literally 'by me there is a daughter' or 'I have a daughter'. The choice between these constructions in Ukrainian and Belarusian is also dependent on different socio-pragmatic, stylistic, and cultural factors, within which the interaction with Russian may exert some influence.

The *HABERE* construction, which is predominant in other Indo-European language groups such as the Romance languages, West Germanic languages, and South Slavic languages (e.g., Macedonian, Bulgarian, Serbian/Croatian, and, to a lesser degree, Slovenian), as well as West Slavic languages (e.g., Czech and Polish), is primarily characteristic of standard Ukrainian and Belarusian, as well as their western dialectal and social varieties. For example:

- Ukr. *ja maju dočku* (<я маю дочку>) 'I have a daughter';
- Bel. *ja maju dačkù* (<я маю дачку>) 'I have a daughter'.

Although the *HAVE* + OBJ construction is also possible in standard Russian, its use is subject to a series of semantic, pragmatic, and stylistic constraints. It typically appears in specific expressions (set phrases) often associated with a formal register.

⁸ It is widely accepted that the possession pattern in early Proto-Indo-European was the existential *mihi est* 'to me is' construction, based on the following predication model: NOM (possessum) + **estī* V 'exists' + DAT (possessor). All ancient Indo-European languages attest to the existence of this construction, with various stages of its development (Grković-Major 2011, p. 38 based on Bauer 2000, pp. 198-223). The developmental history of the verb *habere* 'to have' from Indo-European to the different branches and language groups is more complex and is generally regarded an innovation that often coexists with the older construction, exemplified by the Lat. *mihi-DAT. est* (Benveniste 1966; Justus 1999, p. 97; Danylenko 2002, p. 106). It is sufficient here to note that *habere* is derived from the root meaning 'hold, grasp'. Both the Greek verb ἔχω (*échō*) and the Latin *habeo* 'I have' originally appeared in absolute and transitive constructions.

In most languages, internal predicative possession can be expressed with two verbal constructions: *HABERE* 'having' and *ESSE* 'belonging'. According to a widely accepted view, this distinction is universal (Heine 1997, p. 33). However, in some languages, the possessum may occupy the same syntactic role in both 'having' and 'belonging' constructions, as, for example, in Latin (cf. Benveniste 1966, p. 196).

For example: *ja imeju čest'* (<я имею честь>) 'I have the honor', etc.⁹ Therefore, the standard Ukrainian parallel and normative construction with *HABERE* [*maty* AUX 'avere' + INF + OBJ (ACC)] appears to be extraneous to these dialects.¹⁰

Conversely, it is interesting to note that the negation of EPCs in the present tense is formed by the predicate *njema(je)* (<нема(є)>) 'there is not, there are not'. The latter is derived from the verb *maty* 'to have' preceded by the negation *ne* 'not'. Whereas the past tense adopts the typical spatial-locative pattern. For example:

9. U m'en'e [m'e'n'e] n'emaje krolikaŭ¹¹
at-PREP me-GEN.SG no/not any-PRED rabbit-GEN.PL.M
'I have no rabbits'

10. U m'en'e [m'e'n'e] n'e bulo krolikaŭ
at-PREP me-GEN.SG no/not any-PRED.PAST rabbit-GEN.PL.M
'I had no rabbits'

A similar construction is found in Belarusian and other Slavic languages. For instance, the form *njama* (<няма> [n'a'ma]) – is derived from the negative particle *n'e* (which, due to the jakanne, changes to *nja*) combined with the verb *maje(š)* [<mec' 'to have'>], lit. not-NEG have-2SG.PRES. In contrast, Russian uses the construction *net* (i.e. *ne est*) 'there is not' or 'there are not' to express the absence of possession.

An interesting example, where an EPC is syntactically possible but semantically may diverge due to the inclusion of an experiential verb, can be illustrated with the verb "hurt" or "ache". In this case, the verb does not express possession in the traditional sense, but rather an experiential state. This can be exemplified in:

11. U m'en'e [m'e'n'e] balit' halava [fala'va]¹²
at-PREP me-1SG.GEN ache-3SG.PAST head-NOM-SG.F
'I have a headache'

⁹ It is plausible to explain that the use of the verb *imět'* 'to have' became more widespread in the language spoken by the Russian elite from the first half of the 18th century onwards, particularly in numerous phraseological expressions. By the end of that century, it had become firmly established in literary Russian, a shift largely driven by the linguistic and cultural influence of German and French, which was especially intensive during that historical period. These constructions subsequently spread to the vernacular dialects of the Russian Empire over the course of the following century (cf. Grković-Major 2011, p. 52; Isačenko 1974).

¹⁰ In the materials collected in the border area, the *ESSE*-construction (Ukr. PP + *buty*) was recorded one **hundred** times versus **zero** occurrence of the *maty* + ACC.

¹¹ It should be noted that in the local dialects spoken near the Belarusian border, the typical genitive plural marker largely coincides with standard Belarusian and/or its dialectal varieties. For further details, see Del Gaudio (2025, p. 311).

¹² The utterance (sentence) "I have a headache" can also be expressed by a dative-experiencer construction: *mn'e balit' halava* (lit. 'to me aches the head').

It is worth noting that the *AUM* and *DABM* only report a similar construction featuring what appears to be an external possessor. For example: *u mene bolyt' holova* [u me'ne bo'litʲ fiolo'va] with stress on the the final syllable [u me'ne] 'I have a headache' (*AUM* 1984, I: map 280) and *u mjane balic' halava* [u mja'nje ballitsʲ yala'va] (*DABM* 1963: map 223). However, it is important to emphasize that when the data for these atlases were collected, the compilers were primarily concerned with highlighting other features, such as the stress patterns of the pronominal forms and the use of personal pronouns in the dative case, rather than focusing specifically on possessive (prepositional) constructions.

Implicit possessive constructions (c) tend to be more complex to identify both at the semantic-pragmatic level and syntactically. In these constructions, the possessor does not necessarily need to be part of the same noun phrase as the possessum. For example:

12. ditja padnjala ruku
 child-NOM.SG.N raise-3SG.PAST.PFV hand-ACC.SG.F
 'the child raised *his/her* hand'

13. Marusja atkryla oči (hlaza)
 Mary-NOM-SG.F open-3SG.PAST.PFV eye-ACC.PL
 'Mary opened *her* eyes'

14. myju ruki
 wash-1SG.PRES hand-ACC.PL.F
 'I wash *my* hands'¹³

Finally, a fourth, less frequent, strategy to express the EPCs is with the possessum encoded by an instrumental NP, for example:

15. sabaka maxaje xvastom
 dog-NOM.SG.M wag-3SG.PRES tail-INS.SG.M
 'the dog wags *its* tail'

¹³ As it can be seen from the English translation of the example, these dialects allow a subject drop (null subject), thus confirming the East Slavic pro-drop tendency.

As illustrated by the English translation of examples (12–15), there is a semantic restriction in English: the possessor (e.g., personal pronouns) must be explicitly stated, unlike in other Slavic and European languages. However, even in languages that permit implicit possessors, such constructions are generally restricted to inalienable possessions, typically body parts and strict, personal relations.¹⁴

Areal distribution of EPCs

As noted elsewhere (Del Gaudio 2015: 54), from a traditionally accepted typological-comparative perspective, Ukrainian, alongside Belarusian and Polish, may be regarded as representing a transitional stage between *ESSE* (or *BE*) and *HABERE* (or *HAVE*) languages (Isačenko 1974, p. 44). Other interpretations, however, suggest that Russian—and, with some reservations, Ukrainian and Belarusian—are linguistically heterogeneous with respect to possessive constructions, exhibiting a dual subdivision depending on contextual usage (Danylenko 2002, p. 121).

More specifically, the East Slavic linguistic area presents a distinctive and at times complex situation. Russian, in its diastratic and diatopic variation, as well as in its historical development, is not as firmly anchored in the *ESSE* possessive model as one might initially assume from an analysis of the standard language. From a geo-areal perspective, this construction predominates in the Northern Russian dialects, where the effects of linguistic contact with Baltic languages and Finno-Ugric substrata are particularly strong and may play a role. According to some scholars, prolonged contact with Finnic varieties led to the spread of the possessive-adesive construction first in the Northern Russian dialects, which later extended to other areas, including the northeastern Belarusian dialects (Proxorova 1991, p. 45). However, predicative possession based on the Locative schema (i.e. the *u* + GEN construction), although peripheral, already existed in Proto Slavic (Common Slavic) and occur in Old Church Slavonic and Old Russian texts (Grković-Major 2011, pp. 42-45).

The distribution of *ESSE* and *HABERE* constructions is more uneven in the southwestern Russian dialects. Additionally, certain dialectal subgroups historically reflect Belarusian and Ukrainian phono-morphological and morphosyntactic features, with the former element predominating over the latter. This is particularly evident in the Bryansk area (cf. Del Gaudio 2025b).

Rather than representing a transitional system, Ukrainian and Belarusian may instead be said to exhibit a typologically “split system”, characterized by the parallel use of both possessive construction types. This situation is historically attested in

¹⁴ For further details, see: Del Gaudio (1998, pp. 18-22) based on König and Haspelmath (1997, pp.573-577); Mazzitelli (2012, p. 37).

both literary Ukrainian and its dialectal varieties. In this regard, the thesis advanced and reiterated by Andrii Danylenko (2002, p. 121)—namely that “the East Slavic languages are characterized by a split system”, with distinct features depending on dialectal and areal distribution as well as on other socio-pragmatic factors—appears to be well founded. For the reasons outlined above, an accurate typological characterization of the East Slavic languages should also consider the specificities of individual dialectal areas and their variation.

Finally, a comparison with contemporary standard Ukrainian usage reveals a different trend underway. In recent years, within the framework of the so-called *kul'tura movy* ‘language culture’, considerable debate has arisen concerning the normative status of the locative (adessive) possessive construction as opposed to the *HAVE* + OBJ construction. As various scholars have observed, a certain bias against the *ESSE* construction (*u mene je*) has emerged. In the present wave of linguistic purism and prescriptivism, this construction is sometimes interpreted—and perceived—as a Russian syntactic calque (cf. Del Gaudio 2023, p. 437; Taranenko 2024, pp. 174–175).

By contrast, the *HAVE* construction, which is prevalent in western Ukrainian varieties and aligns with the standard strategy in the western Slavic languages, is regarded and promoted by some scholars—though not necessarily linguists—as the only pan-Ukrainian form. This position has led to an increased use of the *HAVE* construction, a tendency that is further reinforced by media discourse, certain scholarly stirred writings and increasingly reflected in everyday language.

However, a review of major normative grammars of Ukrainian published in previous decades confirms that both constructions are considered semantically equivalent (Jermolenko et al. 2013, p. 283) and, we can add, at least on an abstract level and without considering additional socio-pragmatic factors. Furthermore, examples of *ESSE* constructions were already present in the documents from Rus’ (e.g., *Izbornyk Svjatoslava* 1076; cf. the 1965 edition) and in subsequent texts of the Middle Ukrainian period, well before the onset of Russification (cf. Taranenko 2024, p. 175). Additionally, in most Ukrainian varieties, possessive constructions in negative clauses combine the *ESSE* model with the predicative *niemaje* (ibid.).¹⁵

Conclusions

The article confirmed that, notwithstanding the proliferation of linguistic-typological studies on possession (or possessivity) and the grammatical strategies

¹⁵ Exception to this pattern can be found in Transcarpathian dialects with the construction *nje* not-NEG *je* BE-SG...*u* PREP *xlopcja* boy-GEN.SG and, in Galicia and Bukovyna, where we have and the synonymic structure *xlopec' nje maje hrošej* ‘the boy has no money’ (cf. AUM 1988, II: map 274).

employed to encode it, the characteristics of possessive constructions at the dialectal level have received limited scholarly attention. Dialects, as known, constitute fundamentally autonomous linguistic systems or subsystems, even though they are usually influenced by standard languages which, in some areas, may function as roof languages (cf. *Dachsprache*).

The present study, focusing on external possessive constructions (EPCs), has demonstrated that Eastern Polissian dialects—particularly those spoken in border areas adjacent to Belarus and the Russian Federation—display a clear preference for EPCs based on the *ESSE*-type model (i.e., constructions structurally equivalent to ‘be’ + possessor in a non-nominative case) over predicative constructions expressed by a *HABERE*-type pattern (Ukrainian *maty* ‘to have’) involving a possessor–predicate–object relation. The latter construction, also attested in Standard Ukrainian and Belarusian, as well as in several nonstandard, predominantly western Ukrainian varieties, has been further reinforced by recent prescriptive and descriptive trends in contemporary Ukrainian language planning.

The analysis of recurrent utterances also revealed that present-tense negation of possession is typically expressed through the negative form of the predicate *maty* ‘to have’ combined with the adessive construction (e.g. *u m'en'e n'emaje...*), a pattern that partially differs from both Standard Ukrainian and Belarusian usage (e.g., *ja ne maju knyhu* ‘I do not have a book’). In contrast, past-tense negation consistently relies on the *ESSE*-type model (e.g., constructions equivalent to ‘there was not by/to me a book’).

From an areal-typological perspective, the dialects examined here confirm both the productivity of EPCs—predominantly based on the *ESSE* model—and the heterogeneity of possessive patterning within East Slavic. In this respect, they can be regarded as a distinct area within Ukrainian. Consequently, the “twofold split linguistic system” proposed by Andrii Danylenko (2002, pp. 119–121) for East Slavic appears to be dialectal-specific and may exhibit a geographically uneven and, at times, non-predictable areal distribution.

Thus, these findings underscore the necessity of integrating dialectal evidence into typological generalizations. A comprehensive characterization of the East Slavic linguistic area—and of its individual languages—needs to account for both standard language features and their diachronic development and dialectal variation.

REFERENCES

1. AUM: *Atlas Ukrajins'koho Mowy* [Atlas of the Ukrainian language]. 1984–2001. 3 vols. Matvijias, I. H. et al. (Eds.). Kyiv: Naukova dumka.

2. Baron, I., Herslund, M., & Sørensen, F. (Eds.). (2001). *Dimensions of possession* (Typological Studies in Language, Vol. 47). John Benjamins Publishing.
3. Bauer, B. L. M. (2000). Archaic syntax in Indo-European: The spread of transitivity in Latin and French. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
4. Bauer, B. (2011). *Archaic syntax in Indo-European: The spread of transitivity in Latin and French* (Vol. 125). Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
5. Benveniste, É. (1966). *Être et avoir dans leurs fonctions linguistiques*. In *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (pp. 140–148). Paris: Gallimard.
6. Clark, E. V. (1978). Locationals: Existential, locative, and possessive constructions. In J. H. Greenberg (Ed.), *Universals of human language* (Vol. 4: Syntax, pp. 85–126). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
7. Činčlejš, K. (1990). *Tipologija kategorii posessivnosti*. Kišenëv [Chişinău]: Stiinca.
8. Cienki, A. (1993). Experiencers, Possessors, and Overlap Between Russian Dative and u + Genitive. *Berkley Linguistic Society*, 19, 76-89.
9. Danylenko, A. (2002). The East Slavic ‘HAVE’: Revising a developmental scenario. In K. Jones-Bley, M. E. Huld, A. Della Volpe, & M. Robbins Dexter (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Thirteenth Annual Conference of the UCLA, Los Angeles 2001* (Journal of the Indo-European Studies Monograph Series No. 44, pp. 105–128).
10. DABM: *Dyjalektalahičny Atlas Belaruskaj Movy* [Dialectal Atlas of the Belarusian Language] 1963. R.I. Avanesaŭ, Ju. F. Mackevič et al. (Eds.). Minsk: Vydavectva Akadëmi Navuk BSSR. Vydavectva Akadëmi Navuk BSSR.
11. Danylenko, A. (2005). Is there any possessive perfect in North Russian? *Word*, 56(3), 347–379.
12. Del Gaudio, S. (1998). *Possessive constructions in European languages: A comparison* (Unpublished master’s thesis). Università di Napoli Federico II / Freie Universität Berlin.
13. Del Gaudio, S. (2015). L’ucraino tra le lingue slave. *Ricerche Slavistiche*, 13(59), 35–71.
14. Del Gaudio, S. (2017). On the concept of possession and possessive constructions: A preliminary insight. *Teoretyčna i dydaktyčna filolohija: Zbirnyk naukovykh prac*, 25, 73–83.
15. Del Gaudio, S. (2023). Alcune peculiarità morfosintattiche dei dialetti ucraini nord-orientali (contesto slavo-orientale). *Europa Orientalis*, 42, 425-439.
16. Del Gaudio, S. (2025a). *Ukrainian border dialects in the Belarusian-Russian contact area*. New York, London, Oxford etc.: Bloomsbury Academic.
17. Del Gaudio, S. (2025b). Elementi bielorusi e ucraini nei dialetti russi sud-occidentali (Regione di Brjansk). *Studi Slavistici*, 2, 203-228.
18. Grković-Major, J. (2011). The development of predicative possession in Slavic languages. *The Grammar of Possessivity in South Slavic Languages: Synchronic and Diachronic Perspectives*. Hokkaido: Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, 35-54.
19. Haspelmath, M. (2001). The European linguistic area: Standard Average European. In M. Haspelmath, E. König, W. Oesterreicher, & W. Raible (Eds.), *Language typology and language universals* (Handbücher zur Sprach- und Kommunikationswissenschaft, pp. 1492–1510). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
20. Heine, B. (1997). *Possession: Cognitive Sources, Forces and Grammaticalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

21. Isačenko, A. S. (1974). On 'have' and 'be' languages. In M. Flier (Ed.), *Slavic forum: Essays in linguistics and literature* (pp. 43–77). The Hague-Paris: Mouton de Gruyter.
22. Jermolenko, S. Ja. (2013). Symvolična i prahmatyčna movna norma. In S. Ja. Jermolenko et al. *Literaturna norma i movna praktyka* (pp. 255–266). Nižyn: Aspekt-Polihrad.
23. Justus, C. F. (1999). The arrival of Italic and Germanic 'have' in Late Indo-European. In *Proceedings of the Tenth Annual UCLA Indo-European Conference, Los Angeles, May 21-23, 1998* (p. 77-94). Washington, D.C.: Study of Man.
24. Kalnyn', L. È., & Mološnaja, T. N. (Eds.). (1986). *Problemy dialektologii: Kategorija posessivnosti*. Moskva: Nauka.
25. Koptjevskaja-Tamm, M. (2003). Possessive noun phrases in the languages of Europe. In F. Plank (Ed.), *Noun phrase structure in the languages of Europe* (pp. 621–722). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
26. Koptjevskaja-Tamm, M. (2004). *Possession in Slavic and the Baltic languages: Typological approaches*. In *The Handbook of Linguistic Anthropology* (pp. 95-107). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
27. König, E., & Haspelmath, M. (1997). Les constructions à possesseur externe dans les langues d'Europe. In J. Feuillet (Ed.), *Actance et valence dans les langues d'Europe* (pp. 525–606). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
28. Mazzitelli, L. F. (2012). *The expression of predicative possession in Belarusian and Lithuanian* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Università degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza" / Johannes-Gutenberg Universität Mainz.
29. Mazzitelli, L. F. (2015). *The expression of predicative possession in Belarusian and Lithuanian*.
30. *A Comparative Study of Belarusian and Lithuanian*. Berlin, München, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.
31. Mazzitelli, L. F. (2017). Predicative possession in the languages of the Circum-Baltic area. *Folia Linguistica*, 51(1), 1-60.
32. Proxorova, S.M. (1991). *Sintaksis perexodnoj russko-belorusskoj zony: areal'no-typologičeskie issledovanija*, Minsk: Universitetskoe.
33. Seiler H. (1983). *Possession as an operational dimension of language*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr.
34. Seiler, H. (2001). The operational basis of possession: A dimensional approach revisited. *Typological Studies in Language*, 47, 27–40.
35. Stassen, L. (2009). *Predicative Possession*, New York: Oxford University Press.
36. Taranenka, O.O. (2024). *Ukrajins'ka literaturna mova kincja XX – peršoji čverti XXI st.: stan i tendencji rosvytku*. Častyna II. Kyiv: Ukrajins'kyj movno-informacijnyj fond NAN Ukrajiny.

The author declares no competing interests.

* This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>)

© The Author 2026

Publisher: Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University, Kyiv, Ukraine

Publishing history: Received 30.03.2026 ; Accepted 28.04.2026; Published 30.05.2026