

David Wilmsen
American University of Sharjah

Grammaticalization and Degrammaticalization in an Arabic Existential Particle *šay*

Abstract

Against the usual assumption that Arabic grammatical operators based on reflexes of *šay* derive from the Arabic word for ‘thing’ *šayʔ*, it is argued here that indefinite quantifiers and partitives instead derive from an existential particle *šay* that is present in some spoken Arabic dialects of the Arabian Gulf, Oman, and the Yemen. The ambiguity of the existential particle in constructions in which it sets off items in a series lends itself to its reanalysis as a quantifier, and its ambiguity as a quantifier motivates its reanalysis as a partitive. This is consistent with grammaticalization theory, whereby lexical forms give rise to grammatical forms, which themselves give rise to even more grammatical forms. Yet, existential *šay* likely did not arise from a lexical form. Instead, it is either a borrowing from Modern South Arabian or it is an inherited Semitic feature, ultimately deriving from an attention-focusing demonstrative. Either way, the grammaticalization of a quantitative *šī/šē/šay* cannot have proceeded directly from word ‘thing’. To the contrary, the word *šayʔ* meaning ‘thing’ can easily derive from an indefinite quantifier or partitive *šay*, in a process of degrammaticalization.

Keywords

degrammaticalization, existential predications, indefinite quantifiers, grammaticalization, Maltese, Mediterranean Arabic, Modern South Arabian, partitives, southern peninsular Arabic.

A few researchers (Obler 1975: 63; Davies 1981: 274; Lucas 2010: 183) have commented upon a reflex of the spoken Arabic grammatical operator *šī* that sets off items in a series. Labelling it an “indefinite quantifier”, Davies (1981: 269) provides an illustrative example with a reflex *ʔišī* in Egyptian Arabic:¹

¹ An explanation of notation appears at the end of the essay. Yet, is a comment about the abbreviation PART appropriate here. It could indicate a participle (abbreviated PCP), a particle (PTCL),

(1) Egyptian Arabic

<i>il-baʔʔāl</i>	<i>ʕand-u</i>	<i>ʔiši</i>	<i>zatūn</i>	<i>wi-šī</i>	<i>gibna</i>
DET-grocer	PREP-PRO.3MS	PART	olives	CONJ-PART	cheese
<i>wi-šī</i>	<i>turši</i>				
CONJ-PART	pickles				

‘The grocer has (some quantities of) olives, cheese, and pickles’ (Davies 1981: 274)

This use of a reflex of *šī* has been documented in a few other spoken Arabic varieties. Using the term “partitive”, which she subsumes under a wider class of quantifiers, Obler brings examples from Mauritanian, Sudanese, and Lebanese Arabic varieties, only one of which presents an unambiguous usage of *šī* functioning as an indefinite quantifier:²

(2) Sudanese Arabic

<i>šī</i>	<i>ḥaṭab</i>	<i>u-šī</i>	<i>raṭab</i>	<i>u-šī</i>	<i>faḍḍa</i>
PART	wood	CONJ-PART	moisture	CONJ-PART	silver
<i>u-šī</i>	<i>dahab</i>				
CONJ-PART	gold				

‘partly wood, partly soft, partly silver, partly gold’ (Obler 1975: 63)

In his study of Bahraini Arabic, Holes (2016: 113) speaks of the “distributive use of *šay*”, examining it and other “distributive nominals” (2016: 38–39, 44, 132–134) or simply “distributives” (2016: 96–98, 113), occasionally qualifying the term with the adjective “indefinite” (2016: 333, 344, & 387). He defines the term as such: “the distributive nominal ... can be seen pragmatically as denoting ‘particular ones from a large group’, each defined by some characteristic” (2016: 132).

An opinion shared amongst most commenting upon this quantitative or distributive use of *šī*, and indeed upon all grammatical functions of reflexes of *šī*, is that it and they derive from a reflex of the classical Arabic word for ‘thing’ *šayʔ*, through, as Davies puts it, “its development as a word with independent lexical status to a delexicalized particle” (Davies 1981: 270). Obler (1977) devotes an entire dissertation to the multitudinous grammatical functions of *šī* and its reflexes, wherein she makes evident from her very title that she sees them all as deriving from the *šayʔ* ‘thing’ of the Arabic of classical writing. Commenting specifically on Davies’ quantifier, Lucas (2010: 183, fn. 17) opines,

or a partitive (PTV). In fact, *šī* may also serve a partitive function (Cowell 2005 [1964]: 467; Obler 1975: 60; Wilmsen 2014: 51–53, 60), closely related to its functioning as an indefinite quantifier. The abbreviation PART is intended to capture both of the latter two senses.

² In Obler’s example from Lebanese Arabic (our example [22]), *šī* appears not to be a quantifier; compare examples (24) to (26) and (28), in which it clearly is.

“quantifier *šī* should be seen as ... clearly derived ultimately from the same source.”

Lucas (2010) is more concerned with the grammaticalization of a reflex of *šī* as a negator than as a quantifier, and the widespread agreement over its derivation about which he speaks (2010: 165 & 180) is more over the involvement of *šī* in negation than it is about quantification. Yet, the deriving of grammatical operators based on reflexes of *šī* from the word ‘thing’ seems gratuitous, based entirely upon the superficial similarity of the word and the particle, and is in fact contested (Wilmsen 2014; Lucas 2015). We shall not here revisit the debate, except to show that a quantitative or distributive *šī*, variously realized as *šay(y)*, *šē*, and *šī* or *šī*, more readily derives from an existential particle than it does from a putative ‘thing’. Other grammaticalizations do follow from this derivation, but we shall consider only one of them: the closely related partitive *šī*.

2. Existential *šī/šē/šay(y)*

One of at least half a dozen existential particles used among the many regional varieties of spoken Arabic (Eid 2008: 84), reflexes of an existential particle *šī/šē/šay(y)* have been documented with little comment by a few researchers, mostly working with the Arabic dialects of the southern Arabian Peninsula, since the end of the 19th century, when Reinhardt (1894: 112) makes mention of it in a dialect of northern Oman, and the early 20th century, with Landberg’s (1905: 24, 25, & 191) attestation of it in southern Yemen:

(3) Southern Yemen

<i>in</i>	<i>kān</i>	<i>šī</i>	<i>karaf</i>
COND	be.PFV	EXIST	rainwater

‘S’il y a de l’eau de pluie’ (Landberg 1905: 24 & 191)

More recently, Behnstedt (1985: 172–3; 2016: 346), Piamenta (1990), and Watson (2011) document it in northern Yemen:

(4) Yemeni Arabic

a. *šē* *zalat*
 EXIST pebbles(money)

‘Do you have any money? (lit. ‘There [is] money?’) (Piamenta 1990: 272)

b. *šī* *xobz*
 EXIST bread

‘Is there any bread (lit. ‘There [is] bread?’)’ (Watson 2011: 31)

Indeed, an existential particle *šē* or *šay(y)* has been attested in Arabic dialects all along the coasts of southern Arabia. Davey (2013) confirms its continued presence in Dhofar, Oman:

(5) Southern Oman

- a. *šē riyāl*
 EXIST unit.of.currency
 ‘Have you got a riyal? (lit. There [is] a riyal?)’ (Davey 2013: 170)
- b. *mā šē masāfa kibīra*
 NEG EXIST distance large
 ‘There is not much space (lit. ‘There [is] not [a] large space’)’ (Davey 2013: 211)

Johnstone (1967) gives an example from the dialect of Dubai (6a), and, negated, from Abu Dhabi (6b) and Bahrain (6c):

(6) Gulf Arabic

- a. *šayy ūid-kum ʔēš*
 EXIST PREP-you.PL livelihood
 ‘Have you any rice? (lit. ‘There [is] at you rice?’) (Johnstone 1967: 170)
- b. *mā-šē nifās*
 NEG- EXIST breath
 ‘There [is] no space’
- c. *mā-šayy ūlūm*
 NEG-EXIST knowledge
 ‘There [is] no news.’ (Johnstone 1967: 170)

Disregarding the negations, which may indeed have a life of their own (Wilmsen forthcoming), Obler (1975: 70) laments that Johnstone’s single example of an affirmative usage of existential *šayy* in Emirati Arabic is – like those in (4), (5a), and (6a) – in a question. Indeed, an interrogative *šī* itself does have a life of its own (Obler 1975: 44–56; Wilmsen 2014: 53–57). Yet, my own observations of the Arabic dialects of the Gulf corroborate the presence of an affirmative existential *šī/šē/šay(y)* in Emirati Arabic. In (7a) a young Sharjah woman in her early thirties is explaining the facilities available in that Emirate’s museums; in (7b) a young Dubai man of thirty-eight years is discussing possibilities of alleviating the risks of climate change:

(7) a. Emirati Arabic

- šay internet wa free.wifi*
 EXIST BORR CONJ BORR
 ‘There [is] Internet and free Wi-Fi’ (Own data)

b. <i>bi-t-gūl</i>		<i>mā</i>	<i>ši</i>	<i>fayda</i>
FUT-2-say.IPFV		NEG	EXIST	benefit
<i>la?</i>	(.)	<i>akīd</i>	<i>šay</i>	<i>fayda</i>
NEG	ADV	EXIST	benefit	

‘You will say, “There [is] no benefit.” No. Surely there [is] benefit’ (Own data)

What is more, a recent textbook for teaching the Emirati dialect to non-native speakers of Arabic (Al Hashemi and Isleem 2015) provides several examples of usage, for example, “*šay šams = fīh šams* ‘It is sunny’ (There is sun)” (2015: 96). It also lists *mā šay fayda* ‘it’s no use’ in its glossary (2015: 349).

The equation of *šay* with the familiar existential particle *fī(h)* introduces another dimension to the discussion: Behnstedt (1985: 172–3; 2016: 346) documents three existential particles, *bī*, *fī(h)*, and *šī*, in place in northern Yemen. Of these three, *fī* and *bī* and their reflexes are more commonly attested (cf. Watson 1993: 14, 163, 255, 387). Holes (1990: 71) suggests that the existential *šay* in Omani Arabic is, “fading out under the influence of the pan-Arabic *fī*”. Describing the dialect of Khabūra north of Muscat, Brockett (1985) says, “‘there is/there are’ is more commonly expressed by the pan-Arabic *fīh* than by *šayy*” (1985: 24). Davey (2013) observes that in the southern Omani dialect of Dhofar, “*še* is considered to be a local variant, and *fīh* is a modern form” (Davey 2013: 162). An existential *šay* appears to be on the wane in Emirati Arabic, too, where, in my observations, the existential particle *fī* is more frequent and can occur interchangeably with *šay* or one of its reflexes in the speech of Emiratis. The examples in (8) show this. That in (8a) is from a Ras al-Khaimah fisherman of early middle age, who, describing the fishing methods formerly in use, utters the two in quick succession, with only a slight pause between them,³ the other two are from a twenty-five-year-old Sharjah woman on two separate occasions, either talking to (8b) or about (8c) her intended:

(8) Emirati Arabic

a. <i>fī</i>	<i>rušāš</i>	(.)	<i>šay rušāš</i>
EXIST	lead		EXIST lead

‘There [were] lead [weights] ... there [were] lead’ [weights] (Own data)

b. <i>lēš</i>	<i>mā</i>	<i>šay</i>	<i>mubarā</i>
Q	NEG	EXIST	competition

‘Why? There [is] no [football] match?’ (Own data)

c. <i>mā</i>	<i>fī</i>	<i>fayda</i>
NEG	EXIST	benefit

‘There [is] no benefit (= ‘It’s no use’) (Own data)

³ An older fisherman in the same conversation uses the negator *mā šay* and the affirmative *šī*.

3. Grammaticalization of quantifier *šī/šē/šay(y)*

This kind of alternation is to be expected of a function word like *šī*, with its multitudinous grammatical roles (for which, see Obler 1975). In a conventional grammaticalization schema, as a content word loses some or all of its original meaning, in a process known as “semantic bleaching”, the original content word is liable to be replaced by a semantic equivalent (Heine and Kuteva 2004: 4–5).

In one of the few works dedicated to grammaticalization in Arabic, Esseesy (2010) explicates the process of semantic bleaching, using “the grammaticalization of *šay?* ‘thing’ and the bleaching of its semantic content” as a model:

Emptied of its original lexical semantic content, it acquires a new function ... usable in a wider range of contexts than was previously allowed when it was used in its original lexical form (Esseesy 2010: 12)

This applies equally well to an original existential *šay*. What is more, another principle of historical language change models in general is the recognition that older uses remain present alongside the newer forms (Campbell 2013 [1998]: 198). Had they not, reconstruction had been impossible.

In that respect, a hypothesized process deriving a quantitative or distributive function for *šī/šē/šay* from an original *šay?* meaning ‘thing’ is opaque. To the contrary, when setting off items in a series, the existential quality of *šī* remains in evidence. Indeed, as Holes (2016: 113) points, out, it is often difficult to distinguish between the existential and distributive uses of *šay*.⁴ Illustrative of this is example (9), in which an Omani fisherman in early middle age enumerates the types of tuna found in the waters of the Gulf of Oman:

(9) Omani Arabic

šē *anwāf* *šē* *šewa* *šē* *gubad* *šē* *sahwa*
 EXIST varieties EXIST skipjack EXIST yellowfin EXIST longtail
 ‘There [are] [many] varieties; there [is] skipjack, there [is] yellowfin, there [is] longtail’ (Own data)

The initial statement is an existential predication. Subsequent ones could either be existential predications or the quantification of a series of examples in support of the initial statement. Whatever they may be, their very ambiguity exposes them to reanalysis as quantifiers or distributives, enumerating items in a series. Such things also occur in Emirati Arabic. The following is from a young professional Abu Dhabi woman, part of a training team with Etihad Airlines:

⁴ Obler (1975: 46) remarks the difficulty of discerning between the interrogative and negation functions of *šī*.

- (10) *baʔa šay muhimm innu ya-ʕrfūn*
 INCH.PFV thing important COMP 3M-know.IPFV
šē huqūq it-tayyār šē huqūq il-cabin.crew šē huqūq il-ATC
 PART rights DET-pilot PART rights DET-BORR PART rights DET-BORR
 ‘It [has] become [an] important thing that they know the rights of the pilot, the cabin crew, [and] air traffic control’ (Own data)

The speaker obviously does not mean ‘thing’ in this use of distributive *šē*, because she uses the word *šay* for that. What is more, the existential quality of *šē* remains in her series of rights pertaining to various parties working in the airline industry:

- (11) ‘It [has] become [an] important thing that they know: there [are] rights of the pilot, there [are] rights of the cabin crew, there [are] rights of air traffic control’

This does not by itself mean that *šayʔ* ‘thing’ and existential and distributive *šī/šē/šay* did not derive from the same source. Nevertheless, the route from existential to distributive quantifier can readily be charted, whereas the route from ‘thing’ to either of those cannot be.

3.1. Contrast

Items in a series are inherently contrastive, and quantifier *šī/šē/šay* in its distributive role does contrast pairs in structures analogous to English ‘some ... others’ (Holes 2016: 26, 113):

- (12) a. Bahraini Arabic
šī taww-ah ʔālīʕ šī fāmīr
 PART now-PRO.3MS arise.PCP PART fruit.PCP
 ‘Some just coming up, others flowering’ (Holes 2016: 26)
- b. Omani Arabic
šay fī-ha nagʕat-ēn šay fī-ha nagʕa wahda
 PART PREP-PRO.3FS shot-DUAL PART PREP-PRO.3FS shot one
 ‘Some could fire two shots, some only one’ (ibid)

Notice, however, that the examples in (12) involve 3rd-person anaphoric pronouns of both genders, meaning that, with a presumed parent form *šayʔ*, which is of masculine gender, a change in syntactic function would have occurred (assuming that agreement is syntactic). According to models of syntactic change, reanalysis occurs when speakers effectuate a change in the syntactic function of an element without also effectuating a change to its structure (cf. Lucas 2010: 188). Put

more simply, speakers take one thing to be something else, and they use it as such. Yet, by the ‘thing’ scenario, in order for a reanalysis of *šay?* to proceed as far as it had in (12), it would perforce have been accompanied by a divestiture of the gender of ‘thing’, in a process of “extension”, which involves a change in the way speakers conceptualize an element (cf., again, Lucas 2010: 188), in the case of *šay?*, regarding it as genderless. Rather like Essee’s (2010: 12) semantic bleaching, extension permits the use of a syntactic element “in a wider range of contexts than was previously allowed” (see also Campbell 2013 [1998]: 273–275). Again, put more simply, speakers assume or attribute to a feature properties that they had not hitherto done.

This is reasonable, as far as it goes; but, in the event, it is unnecessary. An existential meaning, in which gender has no bearing, remains recoverable:

- (13) a. There [are] [plants] now coming up; there [are] [plants] flowering
 b. There [is] [a rifle] [with] two shots in it; there [is] [a rifle] [with] one in it

Holes addresses the matter of variability of agreement (2016: 344) with another ‘some ... others’ construction, there assuming that *šē*, which he had been calling an “existential partitive” (2016: 113), actually does mean ‘thing’, noting the, “variability in its agreement pattern, e.g. in the following exchange where *šay* is singular, but the predicated verbs are plural, echoing the form of the verb predicated of the pl noun *byūt* [‘houses’] in the question.”

(14) Bahraini Arabic

- a. *mā yi-xurr-ūn əhumma*
 NEG 3-leak.IPFV-3PL PRO.PL
 ‘Don’t they [= your houses] leak?’
- b. *šay yi-xurr-ūn šay mā yi-xurr-ūn*
 PART 3-leak.IPFV-3PL PART NEG 3-leak.IPFV-3PL
 ‘Some leak, some don’t leak’ (Holes 2016: 344)

This example is of a different sort from the others that Holes adduces. Those involve non-human plural heads attracting feminine singular agreement, for instance, his succeeding example, *byūt zēna* ‘good [quality] houses’ (ibid), in which the plural noun *byūt* (sing. *bēt*) attracts feminine singular agreement in the adjective *zēna* (m. *zēn*). Ferguson (1986) has labeled this “deflected” agreement, in which “a plural controller [subject or head noun] is associated with a feminine singular target [verb, noun-modifier]” (1986: 9). Ferguson does note a type of usually invariable masculine singular agreement, which he calls “equivocal agreement” whereby “the target precedes the controller and is less specified than the controller in gender and number, typically being masculine singular

regardless of whether the controller is feminine or plural” (ibid). Remaining with our example of leaking houses, an example of that would be *yixurr byūt ktīra/ktār* ‘many houses leak,’ here in which the verb preceding its plural subject is masculine singular. Meanwhile, the adjective would show either deflected agreement (*ktīra*) or plural (*ktār*).⁵ Equivocal agreement in the verb is the usual state of affairs in modern written Arabic, in which about 60% of its sentences are VSO. The situation is more complex in the spoken dialects, in which equivocal agreement may or may not occur when or if the verb precedes the subject, and non-human plural controllers can take deflected or plural agreement in the target, depending upon the semantics involved (Belnap 1993).

In (14), however, *šay* is in the position of a head noun, that is, the controller, not the target. In that case, it is the verb that is the target, which, when following the subject or controller, would be expected to agree with it. A singular noun with plural agreement is simply ungrammatical. At the very least, it would have to be the plural ‘things’ *ašya* or *ašāyi?*, depending upon the variety of Bahraini Arabic (Holes 2001: 284). Holes does give an example of what would appear to be masculine agreement with *šay* in Bahraini Arabic; likewise Brockett in northern Omani Arabic:⁶

(15) a. Bahraini Arabic

šī	<i>a-šīd-ah</i>	šī	<i>yi-ṭīr</i>
PART	1S-hunt.IPFV-PRO.3M	PART	3M-fly.IPFV

‘Some I hunt; some escape’ (Holes 2016: 26)

b. Omani Arabic

šayy	<i>yi-samm-ū-h</i>	<i>il-wayg</i>
PART	3-name.IPFV-PL-PRO.3	DET-term
šayy	<i>yi-samm-ū-h</i>	<i>il-mṣalqa</i>
PART	3-name.IPFV-PL-PRO.3	DET-term

‘Some call it *il-wayg*; some call it *il-mṣalqa*’ (Brockett: 1985: 140)

It may be possible to read *šī* in (15a) as ‘thing’, rendering the meaning ‘A thing, I catch it; A thing, it escapes.’ Although this is clumsy, Arabic does not work like English, and glosses are often approximate, such that an awkward English rendering may, indeed, be closer to the Arabic. A reading in (15b) ‘[A] thing, they call it *wayg*; [a] thing, they call it *mṣalqa*’ is impossible. In that rendering, it would appear that two (or more) things are under discussion, when in the example it is only one: a yoke. The existential reading thus remains:

⁵ Cf. Holes’ (2016: 345) examples with the plural noun *sayāyir* ‘cars’, with which the same speaker uses both deflected (*galīla*) and plural (*galīlīn*) agreement in the adjective ‘few’.

⁶ Notice that Holes glosses his example in the plural, even though the pronoun and the verb are masculine singular.

- (16) a. There [are] some they leak, there [are] some they don't leak
 b. 'There [is] [a bird] I catch it; there [is] [a bird] it flies.
 c. 'There [are] [some] they call it *wayg*; there [are] [some] they call it *mʕalqa*

3.2. Juxtaposition

For that matter, the copula in any of these predications is never present, only appearing in the glosses as an aid to the explication of meaning. Regardless, distributive *šī*, when used in juxtaposition – a type of contrast – acquires a copular quality. Watson calls attention to this quality of existential *šī* in Yemeni Arabic, remarking, “it [*šī*] also has the sense of ‘either ... or’” (Watson: 2011: 31):

- (17) Yemeni Arabic
šī yawm šī yawm-ayn
 PART day PART day-DUAL
 ‘Either one or two days’ (Watson 2011: 21)

Here, although the distributive function persists as Holes defines it, “denoting ‘particular ones from a large group’, each defined by some characteristic” (2016: 132), a recoverable existential quality is not immediately obvious. Yet, a gloss employing the English subjunctive of the verb ‘to be’ comes close to capturing it. Thus, an idiomatic English gloss of (17) that comes closer to the Arabic construction would be this:

- (18) ‘Be it [a] day; be it two days’.

This same juxtapositional, quasi-copular usage is present in Emirati Arabic. In (19), a Sharjah woman of early middle age employs it in explaining the making of a type of pastry:

- (19) Emirati Arabic
t-ħiṭṭ-īn ʕalē-hi šī dihin šī tamir
 2-put.IPFV-FS PREP-PRO.3FS PART fat PART dates
 ‘You put on it be it butter be it dates’ (Own data)

Rubin (2005) observes that because no verb ‘to be’ can be reconstructed to Proto-Semitic, Semitic languages in general have formed copulae out of whatever was to hand, be it independent pronouns, presentatives, or existential particles (Rubin 2005: 41–46). Eid (2008: 81) remarks the “extraordinary similarity” between Arabic existential and copular structures. A transition from an existential to a copular construction could thus easily occur.

This, then, provides a plausible derivation for the Egyptian Arabic *ʔiši*. Neither Davies (1981: 274) nor Badawi and Hinds (1986: 25), who adduce an example much like that of Davies, provide a gloss for it. Yet its presence does add meaning to the series that it sets off, and this may be captured by the English gloss ‘be it’. Even then, an existential reading remains available. The example in Badawi and Hinds illustrates this, theirs being slightly more amenable to a smooth rendering into English than is that of Davies:

(20) Egyptian Arabic

<i>ʕand-u</i>	<i>mimma</i>	<i>gamīʕ-u</i>	<i>ʔiši</i>	<i>gibna</i>	<i>w</i>	
PREP-PRO.3MS	PREP	all-PRO.3MS	PART	cheese	CONJ	
<i>ʔiši</i>	<i>zatūn</i>	<i>w</i>	<i>ʔiši</i>	<i>sardīn</i>	<i>mā</i>	<i>t-ʕidd-iš</i>
PART	olives	CONJ	PART	sardines	NEG	2-count.IPFV-NEG

‘He has something of everything: cheese, olives, sardines; what have you’
(Badawi and Hinds 1986: 25)

Here, *ʔiši* can be read as being analogous either to a quasi-copular ‘be it’ or to an existential ‘there is’:

- (21) a. ‘He has [some] of all [sorts]: be [it] cheese, be [it] olives, be [it] sardines’
 b. ‘He has [some] of all [sorts]: there [is] cheese, there [are] olives, there [are] sardines’

4. Dispersal of distributive *šī*

Calling *šī* a “partitive”, Obler (1975: 63) attempts a few examples of a distributive *šī* from other Arabic dialect areas, including Lebanon. Yet, in the Lebanese example that she provides, *šī* does not look to be performing a distributive function. Instead, it serves precisely in its well-rehearsed role as meaning ‘thing’:

(22) Lebanese Arabic

<i>el-abyaḍ</i>	<i>šī</i>	<i>we-l-aswad</i>	<i>šī</i>
DET-white	thing	CONJ-DET-black	thing
<i>we-l-ḥilwe</i>	<i>gelb-et</i>	<i>kill-šī</i>	
CONJ-DET-sweet	win.PFV-PRO.3FSD	DET-thing	

‘White is one thing, black is another; but beauty conquers all’ (Obler 1975: 63)
 (lit. ‘White [is] [a] thing, black [is] [a] thing; but beauty wins [over] everything’)

Nevertheless, a distributive *šī* does function as such in Lebanese Arabic. Fleisch (1974) provides an example, the context being a tale about a group of villagers who have been surprised with the sudden news of a thief, and who, in response, arise in hot pursuit, bearing whatever arms were to hand, wearing whatever they had on:

(23) Lebanese Arabic

w-ʔāmu yerʔkdu baʔ-ʔāleʕ, hāda hāmāl fard w-hāda hāmāl bārūde w-hāda hāmāl dabbūs w-hāda hāmāl mənʒel,

šī lēbs-īn bižāmāt šī lēbs-īn srēwīl bīd
PART wear.PCP-PL pajamas PART wear.PCP-PL sirwal white

šī lēbs-īn klēsīn
PART wear.PCP-PL undershorts

‘Et se mirent à courir à la montée : qui portait un revolver, qui un fusil, qui un gourdin-casse-tête, qui une faucille. Les uns étaient en pyjama, d’autres en chéroual blanc, d’autres en caleçon’ (Fleisch 1974: 359–360)

This is exactly the type of phrasing that we have seen in the Arabic varieties of the southern Peninsula and that we have seen in Egyptian Arabic. The interpretation ‘thing’ has no place here, but an existential predication does:

- (24) ‘They started running up the mountain, this [one] carrying a revolver, that [one] carrying a rifle, this [one] carrying a cudgel, and that [one] carrying a sickle. There [were] [some] wearing pyjamas, there [were] [some] wearing white pantaloons, there [were] [some] wearing undershorts.’

So, too, do we find *šī* contrasting pairs of items in an ‘either ... or’ type of juxtaposition:

(25) Lebanese Arabic

a. *bi-yi-rm-u ʕalē-h tuham šī mħaššīš*
HAB-3-throw.IPFV-PL PREP-PRO.3M accusations PART hash.smoker

šī sakrān
PART drunk

‘They are throwing accusations at him: [he is] either stoned or drunk’
(Own data)

b. A: *ka-ʔinnu il-ʒaww ʕamm-bi-yi-tyayyar hal-ʔiyyām*
ADV-CONJ DET-weather PROG-HAB-3-change.IPFV. DET-days

B: *ē šī bārid šī šōb*
yes PART cold PART hot

A: ‘[It seems] as if the weather is changing these days’

B: ‘Yeah; either cold or hot’

Like its southern peninsular counterparts (*vide* [14]), the *šī* of Lebanese Arabic can also set off a series of verb phrases:

(26) Lebanese Arabic

šī *bi-t-ḡūl-i* *taṣbān-e* *šī* *bi-t-ḡūl-i* *ḡawṣān-e*
 PART HAB-2-say.IPFV-FS tire.PCP-F PART HAB-2-say.IPFV-FS hunger.PCP-F
 ‘Either you say [that you are] tired, or you say [that you are] hungry’
 (Own data)

This type of usage is characteristic of Levantine dialects as a whole.⁷ The following is from a southern Syrian dialect of the Ḥawrān Plateau, a middle-aged woman objecting to the attitude of her husband’s paternal uncle toward her gender:

(27) Syrian Arabic

bi-t-laḥḥaq-š *t-šūf* *illā* *šī* *a-ḡmil* *šāy*
 HAB-2-manage-NEG 2-see.IPFV PREP PART 1-make.IPFV tea
šī *midri* *šū*
 PART know.PCP Q
 ‘You manage not [to] see except either [that] I make tea or [I don’t] know what’ (Own data)

Notice that *šī* precedes the verb ‘to make’ in (27). In (28), from an elderly Syrian woman, now living just on the other side of the border in the Lebanese Beqaa Valley, it juxtaposes two:

(28) *mi-n-limm* *il-laban* *yelli* *hinne* *ḡam-bi-ya-ḡmil-ū-h*
 HAB-1PL-gather.IPFV DET-yoghurt REL PRO.3PL PROG-HAB-3-make.
 IPFV-PL-PRO.3MS
wa *šī* *mi-n-wazzaḡ-uh* *šī* *mi-n-bīḡ-uh*
 CONJ PART HAB-1PL-distribute.IPFV-PRO.3MS PART HAB-1PL-sell.IPFV-
 PRO.3MS
 ‘We take the yoghurt that they produce and either we distribute it or we sell it’ (Own data)

Indeed, the context shows clearly that what is meant is something other than ‘thing’. The yoghurt under discussion is known and named, whereas ‘thing’ is unspecified and unknown.

⁷ See also the Lebanese and Syrian examples in Wilmsen (2014: 123–124).

Tunisian Arabic, which utilizes reflexes of *ši* as a grammatical operator for several functions, including interrogation and negation (Singer 1984: 718–720 & 722–723), also uses *šay* in juxtaposition.⁸ Singer (1984: 678), classifying it under *Konjunktionen, die zuordnen oder eine Alternative anzeigen*, defines it as meaning ‘partly’ (*šay – šay* ‘*teils – teils*’), giving the following two examples:

(29) a. Tunisian Arabic

šay *yi-thammal* **u-šay** *yi-tlawwah*
 PART 3-carry.IPFV.PASS CONJ-PART 3-discard.IPFV.PASS
 ‘*Teilweise wird aufgehoben und teilweise wird weggeworfen*’

b. *nhār es-sabt* *la-šbād* *te-lqā-hum* **šay** *ye-ħdem*
 day DET-Saturday DET-people 2-find.IPFV-PRO.3PL PART 3-work.IPFV
u-šay *baṭṭal*
 CONJ-PART stop.PFV
 ‘*Samstags arbeiten die Leute nur zum Teil*’

Yet, Singer’s glosses do not quite capture the meaning of Tunisian *šay*. Rather, in the examples do they look to be either/or and some/other juxtapositions. Thus:

(30) a. Either [it] is carried or [it] is thrown away

b. On Saturdays, some people work and others [have] stopped [for the weekend]

An existential reading also remains in each of these:

(31) a. ‘There [is] [that] carried, and there [is] [that] thrown away

b. ‘On Saturdays, you’ll find there [are] people working and there [are] [people] [have] quit [for the weekend]’

Indeed, the alternate readings ‘either/or’ and ‘some/other’ in (30) follow from the existential predications.

It is worth considering the peripheral Arabic dialect Maltese, which is closely related to Tunisian Arabic (Hammet 2012; Zammit 2014; Čeplö et al 2016) and probably descended from the parent form(s) of modern Tunisian Arabic, and also utilizes what Vanhove (2009) calls “the nominal quantifier” *ši* (spelled {xi} in Maltese orthography) to place items in juxtaposition. Vanhove does not treat the distributive quality of quantifier *xi*, although she examines many of its other features. Nor do other researchers who devote some attention to its numerous functions in the language (e.g., Haspelmath and Caruana 1996)

⁸ But not in existential predication, in which Tunisian Arabic uses *famma* and *θamma* (Singer 1984: 316).

or dictionaries (e.g., Aquilina 2006) and grammars of the language (e.g., Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander 1997) address it as such. Indeed, Borg and Azzopardi-Alexander call it a “non-distributive quantifier” (1997: 73).

Nevertheless, as a *distributive* quantifier, it is a common feature of the language, as can be seen from a search of a corpus of Maltese, the 250 million token Korpus Malti.⁹ From that, a search of the string {xi} +* xi returned 10,727 matches, of those, 6,660 are records of spoken Maltese from parliamentary debates. Many of those involve lexicalizations, in what Haspelmath and Caruana (1996: 215) label the *xi series* of indefinite pronouns, for example, *xi ħadd* ‘someone’ (< *ši* ‘INDF’ + *wāhid* ‘one’) and *xi ħaġa* ‘something’ (< *ši* ‘INDF’ + *ħaġa* ‘thing’ < ‘need’), as in *xi ħadd jgħid xi ħaġa* ‘Someone say something.’ Nevertheless, there are numerous instances in the Korpus Malti of *ši ... ši* that are not lexicalizations of this sort, most of those involving a juxtaposition of two alternatives:

(32) Maltese

vetrina ideali għal xi ħelu u xi stokk ta' grocer
vetrīna idēāli āl ši elu ū ši stock
 showcase ideal PREP PART sweets CONJ PART stock
ta groser
 POSS grocery
 ‘[An] ideal showcase for sweets or grocery stock’ (Own data)

There are, however, occasional listings of a series of three:

(33) Maltese

in-nies ... kienet taġġtih xi għejna, xi tajra u xi haġ 'ohra ta' l-ikel
in-nēs kēnet ta-ti-i ši čtż ši tayra
 DET-people be.PFV 2f-give.IPFV.PRO.3MS PART cheese PART bird
ū ši āġa ōra ta l-ikel
 CONJ PART thing PRO POSS DET-food
 ‘People would give him cheese, [a] bird, and [some] other food item’
 (Own data)

In either of these, either a ‘be it ... be it ... be it’ or an ‘either ... or ... and/or’ reading is apt.

⁹ <http://mlrs.research.um.edu.mt/index.php?page=corpora>

5. Partitive *ši*

A clear interpretation, however, is complicated by the partitive quality of *ši*, which is also common in Maltese, and to which researchers have devoted some attention. Although similar in function and form to distributives, instead of “denoting particular ones from a large group, each defined by some characteristic” (Holes 2016: 132), partitives denote “a single entity as one among a number of entities, but otherwise indistinguishable from them” (Hirtle 1988: 465). Without using the term “partitive”, Vanhove defines *xi* functioning as such: “*xi* is a third degree determiner, i.e. it expresses a quantitative extraction and a qualitative operation” (2006: 18), explaining:

Xi, which is invariable, may precede a singular, collective or plural substantive, in both semantic domains of continuous, i.e. discrete (or count) nouns, and discontinuous, i.e. dense (or mass) or compact nouns. It expresses several semantic values: SOME, ANY, CERTAIN, ABOUT, ROUGHLY. (ibid)

She supplies numerous examples from her own data and that of others, all of them exhibiting the partitive usage of *xi*, for example:

(34) Maltese

xi eżempji iżjed tajbin

ši eżempji iżyed tayyb-īn

PTV examples CMPTV good-PL

‘some better examples’ (Vanhove 2006: 25)

In his dictionary of Maltese, Aquilina (2006)¹⁰ defines uses of *xi* in partitive terms:

1 some. 2 used before a singular noun to indicate unknown person, place, or object. 3 used adverbially in the sense of ‘about’ before numbers ... 4 used with nouns in the sense of ‘considerable’. 5 what, in (i) interrogative questions. (ii) statements. 6 exclamatory, followed by a noun to express wonder, pleasant impatience or painful surprise. (Aquilina 2006: 402)

His definitions 5, 6, and 7, however, do not delineate partitive functions. We shall comment briefly on 5 and 6 below. For now, notice his final definition: “7 used before a verb to express emphasis.” Unfortunately, Aquilina does not give an example. Yet it appears that it is not as an emphatic but as a distributive that

¹⁰ This is from the *Concise Maltese English – English Maltese Dictionary*, which is an abridged version of the much larger two-volume *Maltese-English Dictionary* released between 1987 and 1990, that is, before the works of other researchers who address indefinite quantifier *xi*.

xi precedes verbs in Maltese, in the same manner as it does in other varieties of Arabic:

(35) Maltese

a. *Hemm hafna xi nbiddu u xi ntejbu*

emm afna ši n-bidl-u

EXIST ADV PTV 1PL-exchange.IPVF-1PL

ū ši n-teyb-u

CONJ PTV 1PL-ameliorate.IPVF-1PL

‘There [is] much we [could/should] change and better’ (Own data)

b. *kandidati li jafu xi jhossu u xi jridu l-Ghawdxin*

kandidāti li y-af-u ši yi-oss-u

candidates REL 3-know.IPVF-PL PTV 3-feel.IPVF-PL

ū ši y-rīd-u l-awđšin

CONJ PTV 3-want.IPVF-PL DET-Gozitans

‘Candidates who know what the Gozitans feel and want’ (Own data)

The examples in (35) cannot be interpreted to mean ‘a thing we can change and a thing we can better’ or ‘a thing the Gozitans feel and a thing they want’. For, whereas Tunisian Arabic and, indeed, Egyptian Arabic do possess the word *šay* or *šē* as alternatives to their usual *hāza* or *hāga*, Maltese has only *hağa* (Vanhove 2006: 17, fn. 1)¹¹.

Against Singer’s brief consideration of *šay* in Tunisian Arabic, Caubet (1983 & 1984) has examined closely the reflex *ši* in Moroccan dialects of the language. She, too, notes the multi-functionality of the particle, devoting much of her attention to its role in interrogation and negation (1983: 33–52; 1984: 229–235), wherewith it operates in much the same manner as it does in Tunisian Arabic. But she devotes an equal amount of attention to its functioning as *un quantificateur nominal* (1983: 33), defining as lending the meaning, “‘*un certain X*’, ‘*un petit X*’” (1983: 46; 1984: 236):

(36) Moroccan Arabic

šatā-ni ši ktūb

give.PFV-PRO.1S PTV books

‘*Il m’a donné quelque livres*’ (Caubet 1983: 237)

Vanhove, too, remarks the similarity between Maltese *xi* and Moroccan *ši*:

Quite like in the case of Moroccan Arabic, the use of the nominal quantifier *xi* with a singular noun marks both a quantitative operation, i.e. the extraction of

¹¹ The word *hāza* for ‘thing’ is typical of North African varieties of Arabic (Caubet 1984: 34).

a single element, already marked in the nominal singular form, and a qualitative operation, by attributing a certain number of differential properties, whatever their vagueness, to the qualified noun. (Vanhove 2006: 20)

Meanwhile, Aquilina's examples 5 and 6 involving the meaning 'what' in statements and exclamatory utterances is also a shared feature between Maltese and Moroccan Arabic:

(37) a. Maltese

xi sfuriġa ta' xagħhar!

xi sfuriyya ta šār
PTV yellowness POSS hair

'What fair hair!' (Vanhove 2006: 31)

b. Moroccan Arabic

klī-na šī gato ŧomr-i ma klī-t bi-hāl-u
eat.PFV-1PL PTV cake age-PRO.1S NEG eat.PFV-1S PREP-
condition-PRO.3

'*Nous avons manger un de ces gâteaux ! Je n'en avais jamais mangé de pareils!*' (Caubet 1984: 48)

In it, too, is a partitive reading recoverable. And, for once, a colloquial English gloss can capture the sense, with "the appropriate prosody", as Vanhove (2006: 31) indicates, by which "*l'intonation doit d'ailleurs obligatoirement refléter une montée mélodique de la voix avec maintien à un haut niveau*", as Caubet (1984: 48) observes: 'She has *some* blonde hair' and 'We ate us *some* cake – like I've never eaten before!'

So, too, is Vanhove's employment of the interrogative 'what' an appropriate gloss, when it is pressed into service as an exclamative, because *šī* does serve as an interrogative in one of its many grammatical functions in Arabic (Wilmsen 2014: 53–54 & forthcoming), and, as such, interrogatives formed of reflexes of /š/ do serve as what are called "wh-exclamatives" (Cowell 2005 [1964]: 570 & 576; Wilmsen 2014: 79–80). An exclamative reading of the Moroccan usage is also appropriate: 'What a cake we ate! I've never eaten anything like it!'

The partitive function of *šī* works in the same manner in Levantine Arabic as it does in Moroccan Arabic and Maltese. Cowell (2005 [1964]) defines the term "partitive" in general: "designating indefinite proportions and quantities" (2005 [1964]: 467), remarking specifically about *šī* that it is "normally used in construct ... with classificatory indefinite terms" (ibid). In that sense, it is functioning as something of an indefinite article and has been recognized as such (cf. Brustad 2000: 26–27; Wilmsen 2014: 51–53). Brustad acknowledges the similarity between Syrian and Moroccan varieties of Arabic:

Both Syrian and Moroccan speakers often identify a noun in the indefinite-specific range with the indefinite article /šī/ *some* (kind of). ... The article /šī/ indicates the partial specificity of the nouns it modifies. ... Speakers use /šī/ to indicate that they have a particular type of entity in mind. (Brustad 2000: 26–27)

Cowell and Brustad give examples of usage from Syria and Morocco:

(38) a. Syrian Arabic

šī bānt ḥālwe

PTV girl sweet

‘a (or some) pretty girl’ (Cowell 2005 [1964]: 467; cf. Caubet 1984: 34, n. 1)

b. Moroccan Arabic

šī nās dīfān

PTV people guests

‘some guests’ (Brustad 2000: 27; cf. Caubet 1983: 237; 1984: 44)

That *šī* and *šay* function in Levantine and North African varieties of Arabic in a manner similar to its functioning in Maltese is revealing. It raises the possibility that quantitative and partitive *šī/šay* have been operable in Arabic at least since Arabic speakers first settled Malta between AD 870 and 1047–8 (Brincat 2008: 141–142).

6. Discussion

The distributive and partitive functions of reflexes of *šay* appear to derive seamlessly from an existential particle *šay*, with which they share considerable similarity – and often overlap – of function, as follows:

(39) existential particle *šay/šē/šī* > distributive particle *šay/šī* > partitive *šī/šī*

The usual understanding of grammaticalization processes is that they involve “the development from lexical to grammatical forms and from grammatical to even more grammatical forms” (Heine and Kuteva 2004: 2). By such reasoning, existential particles, being more grammatical than they are lexical, must be a step away from an original lexical origin.

Indeed, the lexical source of many of the Arabic existential particles is transparent, remaining present in the language in their original meanings. Not all of them, however. Eid (2008: 84) lists twelve spoken Arabic existential particles. Six of them are in use in the mainland dialects of Arabic: *aku*, *bī(h)*, *fī(h)*, *kāyen*, *θamma* (*famma*), and *šay*. Another six are found in peripheral

Arabic dialects, most of those being variants of *fī*.¹² The derivations of three of these are obvious: reflexes of *bī* and *fī* probably derive from prepositions meaning ‘in’, likely sharing a single origin; *kāyen* looks to be a straightforward participle of the verb ‘to be’ *kān/yi-kūn*. The origins of the other three are less certain. For *θamma*, Bergsträsser (1909: 54) suggests a common West Semitic origin in a demonstrative adverb **θam-* ‘there’. For its part, *aku* may also be of ancient origin. Although it appears to be a derivation of the Arabic verb ‘to be’ *ya-kūn*, such a derivation has not gone uncontested, most recently with Holes (2016 16–18 & 89, n. 14, 112–113) proposing that it is a borrowing from a non-Arabic Semitic adstrate in areas of ancient Mesopotamian influence, including the Arabian Gulf.

As for *šay*, it too, could be of an ancient Semitic origin. Old Semitic languages possess existential particles of similar form: Hebrew *ʔiš/yēš*, Aramaic *ʔiθ(ay)*, Ugaritic *ʔiθ*. Some languages retain only the negated form: Akkadian *laššu*, Old Aramaic *lyš* (Blau 1972; Gensler 2000; Măcelaru 2003). Arabic, too, exhibits the negated form *lys*, but an affirmative *ʔays* is also attested in a few early Arabic grammatical treatises from the 8th and 9th centuries (Wilmsen 2016), and it is used with its meaning ‘existence’ in the epistles of the 9th-century philosopher al-Kindi (Gihami nd: 35), who also uses *laysa* to mean ‘non-existence’.

It behooves us to note that the [θ] and [š] in these particles present a “tangled etymological problem” (Gensler 2000: 235). We need not rehearse its particulars here except to summarize the crux of the matter: by conventionally understood sound correspondences, all of the attested existential particles cannot derive from one and the same Proto-Semitic etymon. The problem led Blau (1972: 61–62) to “postulate an original Proto-Semitic doublet expressing ‘being’, viz. **ʔiθay* and **yisʔ*”. Măcelaru (2003) proposes an original **yš*, suggesting, “**yθ* and **yš* “emerged only subsequently as its allomorphs ... in a period of unity of what was to become the different attested Semitic languages” (2003: 234), later clarifying that **yV + s*, as a locational deictic construction, “was inherited from a pre-Semitic phase” (2004: 450).

These two proposals are not contradictory. Indeed, as Gensler reminds us, “Proto-Semitic, like any language, could perfectly well have had homonymy in any sphere(s) of its grammar” (2000: 261). Regardless of the difficulties, a plurality of writers venturing to solve them share the view that Arabic *laysa* derives from a parent form **la-isa* ‘not-exist’ (Gensler 2000: 245; Măcelaru 2003: 238), which itself derives from **yš*, as do the Akkadian and Old Aramaic existential negators *laššu* and *lyš* along with the affirmative Hebrew *yēš* (Blau 1972: 61).¹³ What is more, Măcelaru’s mention of **yš* introduces a further knot

¹² But notice the variant of *θamma* in the Maltese *emm* in (34), which Eid does not list.

¹³ Blau derives the rare Hebrew *ʔiš* from **ʔiθ*, the other member of his doublet.

into the etymological tangle: the Modern South Arabian existential particle *li* – often represented *ši* in works on Semitic. By the same conventional understanding of sound correspondences in Semitic, the [ʔ] in *ši* can neither derive from [θ] nor from [š]. Nevertheless, an existential particle *ši* is present in Modern South Arabian languages. Simeone-Senelle (2011: 1108) asserts its presence in Mehri, Harsūsi, Hobyōt, and Jibbali, giving an example from Mehri, *ši ħmo* ‘there is water.’ Watson (2012: 134) gives similar Mehri examples in the form of polar interrogatives *ši šxōf* ‘Is there milk?’ and *ši šayd* ‘Are there any fish?’

This is exactly the same construction that we have witnessed in our discussion of the Arabic existential *šī/šē/šay*. Furthermore, Watson (2011) compares the Yemeni Arabic ‘either ... or’ expression in (17) with the Mehri:¹⁴

(40) Modern South Arabian

<i>ši</i>	<i>bōh</i>	<i>w-ši</i>	<i>bōh</i>
PART	DEM	CONJ-PART	DEM

‘Some here, some there (lit. ‘exist[s] here and exist[s] here’)’ (Watson: 2011: 31)

With this, a possible origin suggests itself. Speakers of southern peninsular varieties of Arabic may have borrowed their existential particle *šī/šē/šay* from Modern South Arabian languages. Those are nowadays in intensive contact with the Arabic dialects of the southern Arabian Peninsula, especially the Omani and Yemeni, in proximity to which most speakers of the Modern South Arabian languages reside.¹⁵ The nature of that contact nowadays is such that the Modern South Arabian languages exhibit more Arabic influence than the other way round (see the discussion in Rubin 2010: 307–309 and Lonnet 2009: 280). Speakers of these languages are so closely integrated into the social fabric of the modern states in which they live that some of them are no longer fully competent in Modern South Arabian, and some have become or are becoming monolingual in Arabic (Watson 2012: 1).

Lonnet (2009) paints a complex picture of past contact between Modern South Arabian languages and Arabic, suggesting that western Mehri has been “deeply altered by contact with Arabic, while Dhofari dialects [of Mehri] have been less so” (2009: 279). For their parts, “Jibbali has been marked by Arabic to a limited extent” (ibid) and Soqotri has until modern times been isolated away from Arabic. Regardless, speakers of Modern South Arabian languages

¹⁴ Pace Simeone-Senelle (2011: 1108), who implies that Soqotri does not possess an affirmative existential particle *ši*, Wagner (1953: 27) attests the same ‘either ... or’ construction in Soqotri: *wa-ħēre šī minól tšābah wa-šī minól tešōmed* ‘und sie [die Vögel] suchten, einige nach Osten, und einige nach Westen.’

¹⁵ Janet Watson, personal communication, October 2016, informs me that large numbers of Soqotri speakers are present in the northern United Arab Emirates.

and Arabic have always been actively involved in trade in the Indian Ocean, providing ample opportunity for borrowing, leading Lonnet to conclude, “it follows that it is not always easy to determine the source and circuitous route of a given loan word” (2009: 280). Withal it appears that Modern South Arabian languages are more sinned against than sinning, having sustained greater inroads from Arabic rather than lending much to Arabic. What is more, most of the loan words into Arabic from South Arabian are substantives (Zammit 2009: 296), often having to do with livelihoods. As such, the existential particle *ti*, which both Jibbali and Soqotri possess, those language having developed, “well away from [the] influences” (Lonnet 2009: 279) of Arabic, may be an original feature of the Modern South Arabian languages.

Unfortunately, we do not know enough about the functioning of an existential *šī* in the Modern South Arabian languages to know the extent to which it mirrors the functions to which we have seen the Arabic *šī/šē/šay* put. Rubin discusses briefly an indefinite pronoun *ši* in Mehri (2010: 44–46) and *sé* in Jibbali (2014: 61–62), giving a few examples that appear to show it working in much the same fashion as in Arabic. About *šī* in Mehri, he says that it means ‘thing’ but it is more often used as an indefinite meaning ‘some’ or ‘any’ (2010: 44). As for Jibbali, “the idea of ‘something’ or ‘anything’ is expressed with the word *sé* (2014: 61). Yet, in some of the examples he cites, the *šī* or *sé* look more to be functioning as partitives or polar interrogatives than indefinite quantifiers. These need further examination before we can begin to gain an understanding of usage and a possible source. Nevertheless, even if the Arabic existential particle *šī/šay* were borrowed from Modern South Arabian, its functioning in the language has proceeded as if it were a native element.

Meanwhile, Holes speaks of an ancient substratum of Arabic dialects along the coastal areas and their hinterlands of the southern peninsula, all sharing elements peculiar to themselves:

A comparison of the dialects of certain sectors of the modern population of eastern and south-eastern Arabia with the dialects of Yemen shows not just shared vocabulary, but ... shared elements of morpho-syntax. These elements, taken together as a ‘bundle’, are sufficiently unusual in the Arabic dialects as a whole for it to be unlikely that they arose independently of one another in the locations where they occur, which are far removed from one another. Their distribution is suggestive of a common source which was spread by a later diaspora. What we know of the population movements in south Arabia in ancient times (admittedly relatively little) suggests that this source may have been south-western Arabia. The dialects in which these elements occur ... are those of the ‘sedentary’ population of northern Oman (mountain and riverine populations, together with the nearby littoral), of some communities in the UAE, and of areas of south-western Arabia. Geographically, these dialects are all on

the periphery of the Arabian Peninsula and form a broken chain around it, from Bahrain in the northeast, to southern Yemen in the southwest. (Holes 2016: 18)

Holes suggests that these dialects are probably of great age (2016: 32 & 41), adducing as evidence the elements of a dialect bundle (see pp. 19–31 for all of them) peculiar to them. One of those is the particle *šī/šay*, about which Holes remarks, “the functions of *šī/šay* in the Baḥārna dialects, the Omani dialects, and those of the Gulf coast which neighbour Oman (Rās al-Khayma, Dubai), are virtually identical with those of *šī* in Yemen” (2016: 25–26). Arabic speakers may have infiltrated the Yemen as early as the 6th century BC. There were certainly settlements of Arabic speakers there by the 3rd or 2nd centuries (Zammit 2009: 295). An existential *šī/šay*, then, must be as old as early migrations of Arabic speakers from Yemen to Oman and the Gulf that occurred at the latest in the 6th/7th centuries AD (Holes 2016: 6–7).

Even then, we are left with the problem that the Arabic *šī/šē/šay* does not conform in shape to a possible ancestral **yš*. This, however, is not insurmountable. Noting the difficulty in reconstructing the vocalization of its consonantal skeleton, Măcelaru (2003: 238) tentatively proposes two alternates: either **yiš* (cf. Blau 1972: 61) or **yaš*. If Arabic inherited either of these as an existential particle, metathesis would yield the particle *šay* or *šiy*, which can yield *šī*. Both of these remain in the language until the present day.¹⁶

If, on the other hand, Arabic inherited an existential particle *ʔays*, deriving ultimately from the same source, **yš*, metathesis would yield *šayʔ*.¹⁷ This, of course, is the shape of one of the Arabic words for ‘thing’. Yet, in order for that particular word for ‘thing’ to derive directly by that route, the existential particle would have had to acquire a new meaning with the change of shape (or afterwards), at the same time – or eventually – losing its existential meaning only to regain it again in the existential particle *šay*. This is unlikely. Alternatively, the existential meaning could have remained in the language alongside the newer meaning. This is more plausible. Either way, the grammaticalization of a quantitative *šī/šē/šay* would not have proceeded directly from the new word ‘thing’.

To the contrary, a noun meaning ‘thing’ can proceed from indefinite quantifiers or partitives. Grammaticalization processes from content word to grammatical operators notwithstanding, movement in the opposite direction,

¹⁶ A diphthongization *šay* from the latter would not be problematic, considering that the final [i/ī] of other Arabic dialects can be pronounced [ay] in Emirati Arabic, e.g. *inti* ‘you.F’ > *intay*, *imšī* ‘walk/leave.IMP’ > *imšay*.

¹⁷ The geminate [y] *šayy* that some researchers have documented (Johnstone 1967: 170, 232, & 234; Brockett 1985: 24 & 140; Holes 2016: 57, 132) would then come about when, “after diphthongs, the deletion of the final glottal triggered strengthening of the glide ... *šayy* (< *šayʔ*)” (Holes 2016: 57).

from grammatical to lexical, also occurs, if less frequently. This process has been called “degrammaticalization” (Norde 2009):

Degrammaticalization changes are ... shifts from affix to clitic or from clitic to grammatical word, within an ambiguous context which allows for reanalysis. A shift from grammatical word to content item will also qualify as degrammaticalization if the constructional identity of the degrammaticalized item is preserved (at least initially). (Norde 2009: 8–9)

Arabic existentials of all kinds are more like grammatical words than they are content words. Consequently, a shift from the grammatical word *šay?* to a content item *šay?* ‘thing’ would by definition be an instance of degrammaticalization. As it happens, the shift from an indefinite pronoun to a noun meaning ‘thing’ is one of the few unambiguous incidents of the process. According to Willis (2007), who documents it in Old Church Slavonic, degrammaticalization involves, “a demonstrable continuity between the old and the new function, with the new function arising out of reanalysis of ambiguous instances of the old function” (Willis 2007: 277). Ambiguity and continuity characterize every step in the sequence from existential particle to partitive in Arabic. The process in Arabic is thus a textbook example of “an ambiguous context which allows for reanalysis” in which “the constructional identity of the degrammaticalized item is preserved” (Norde 2009: 8–9). About the shift from an indefinite to a content word, Norde comments:

Although the transition from pronoun to noun appears to be rare crosslinguistically, in this particular case it is not difficult to conceive how this change could have occurred both from a semantic and a morphosyntactic point of view, as Willis [2007] convincingly demonstrates. In some contexts, ‘something’ [or, in Arabic, simply ‘some’] can easily be interpreted as an unspecified, unknown ‘thing’. (Norde 2009: 144)

In point of fact, the Arabic word *šay?* is, in writing, used in ways that can be interpreted at times as being analogous to the English noun ‘thing’ and at others to the indefinite pronoun ‘something’:

- (41) a. *šay?* *min* *al-ḥawf*
 PRO.INDF PREP DET-fear
 ‘Something of fear’ (Qur’ān 2:115)
- b. *hādā* *šay?* *ʕaġīb*
 DEM thing strange
 ‘This [is] [a] strange thing’ (Qur’ān 38:5)

Its analogues in the spoken dialects work in the same way. That in itself gives rise to the question of origins. The antecedent of ‘thing’ could easily have been a reanalysed indefinite pronoun *šay*, deriving from a partitive, itself deriving from an indefinite qualifier/distributive *šī/šay*.

Nor is it necessary to posit an original content word as giving rise to the existential particle. In marshalling what he calls “extra-Semitic Afrasian evidence” (2003: 234) in support of a parent form **yš*, Măcelaru sketches the essential grammaticality of possible sources from an Afroasiatic parent for a Semitic existential particle **yš*, noting especially their fundamental quality as a “pragmatic device meant to express focus” (Măcelaru 2004: 447). The establishment of joint focus of attention is one of the most basic functions of language, and it is the essential quality of demonstratives (Diessel 2014: 10). In their cross-linguistic survey of 500 languages in which they catalogue the processes involved in the development of grammatical categories, Heine and Kuteva observe, “demonstratives in their pronominal uses may give rise to various copular functions, such as existential, identifying, and qualifying functions” (2004: 109). Their work is a catalogue of grammaticalizations, specifically from content words to grammatical operators. But demonstratives, too, are more grammatical than content-bearing, such that Diessel (2014) proposes that they constitute a unique class of linguistic expressions to which the usual grammaticalization sequence does not apply, remarking, “despite intensive research, there is no evidence that demonstratives evolved from content words,” adding “the available data suggest that demonstratives provide a second major source for the development of closed-class function morphemes, which is eventually motivated by their communicative function to establish joint attention” (2014: 11–12).

We have a model for existentials deriving from demonstratives in Arabic in Bergsträsser’s (1909: 54) proposal for the origin of the existential particle *θamma* in a demonstrative adverb **θam-* ‘there’ and, more transparently, in the demonstrative *hunāka* ‘there’, which begins to appear as an existential particle in Arabic writing in the late 8th century (Wilmsen 2016: 354–355). Diessel, who has been studying demonstratives in minute detail since 1999, classifies the various types of demonstratives and the categories of grammatical operators to which they give rise, delineating a type of demonstrative that he says, “is almost entirely unknown in the typological literature” (1999: 5), nevertheless, later (1999: 58) citing six researchers who had grappled with the type. Each of those provides an individual term for the class, one of them being “existential demonstrative”. Diessel uses the term “demonstrative identifier” and “identificational demonstrative” (1999: 5–6, 78–88, & 143–155), providing typological distinctions for the two terms. His distinctions need not concern us except to note his qualification for the former:

Since demonstrative identifiers often occur in nonverbal clauses, they are sometimes considered to be functionally equivalent to a demonstrative plus copula, which many languages require in this construction. In fact, demonstrative identifiers are often glossed as ‘this/that.is’ or ‘here/there.is.’ (Diessel 1999: 58)

Arabic, of course, does not require a copula, and its existential particles do form non-verbal predications, which are, indeed, glossed ‘there.is/are.’

Conclusion

Much of this is conjectural; as well it must be when contending with the indirect evidence left in daughter languages by their hypothetical ancestors. Nevertheless, the conjecture is based in and is consistent with linguistic principles that have been developed precisely for supporting hypotheses about the origin and development of grammatical categories and classes. What is not conjecture, however, is that an existential *šī/šē/šay* is present in contemporary spoken varieties of Arabic and that processes deriving other grammatical operators of the same form are on display in the language, whereas the evidence is tenuous for putative processes that may have derived that existential particle and other grammatical functions from a word for ‘thing’ *šay?* The fragmentary evidence for a precursor or precursors for an existential particle *šī/šay* and the theoretical apparatus delineating how such things operate in language suggest that it may be an ancient relic whose origins extend beyond proto-Afroasiatic to the earliest functioning of human language.

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Corpus

Korpus Malti: <http://mlrs.research.um.edu.mt/index.php?page=corpora>

Abbreviations

ADV	adverbial (Arabic has few true adverbs)
BORR	borrowing
CMPTV	comparative
COMP	complementiser
COND	conditional
CONJ	conjunction
DAT	pronoun indicating a dative relationship, usually equivalent to ‘to’ or ‘for’
DET	determiner
DEM	demonstrative
EXIST	existential particle
FUT	particle prefixed to verbs, indicating anticipated future action
HAB	particle prefixed to verbs, indicating ongoing/habitual action
IMP	imperative
INCH	inchoative
INDF	indefinite
IPFV	imperfective
NEG	negator
PART	particle with partitive qualities
PASS	passive
PFV	perfective
PREP	preposition
PROG	particle prefixed to the verb, indicating progressive action
PTV	partitive
Q	question particle
F	feminine
M	masculine
PL	plural
S	singular
1	1st person
2	2nd person
3	3rd person