From possessive suffixes to definite articles

According to Dryer (1989) only one third of the languages of the world exhibits definite articles. These mainly occur in four typical usages (Hawkins 1978) i.e. in direct anaphoric use (*a car … the car*), immediate situational use (in a car: *press the clutch*), associative anaphoric use (*a book … the author*) and larger situational use (in Great Britain: *the queen*). Languages which lack definite articles may use e.g. word order, case inflection, verbal inflection or phonological stress to express the uniqueness of a referent in such uses (Schroeder 2006). Some of these alternative strategies of definiteness marking may provide a source for the development of a definite article.

In my talk I will discuss the emergence of definite articles in some Uralic languages which assign their possessive suffixes the additional function of a definiteness marker. I will show why possessive markers are an adequate source for definiteness markers, how their grammaticalization pathway may have proceeded and to what extent it differs from that of Indo-European definite articles. The grammaticalization pathway of the latter is well-described and seems to be the most widespread way of evolving a definiteness marker (cf. Lyons 1999). The proposed development of definite articles in the Uralic languages in contrast seems to be rare but is not uncommon; it has been described also for Indonesian (Himmelmann 1997); Yucatec Maya (Fraurud 2001) and some Turkic languages (Pakendorf 2001). I will focus on Komi, Udmurt and Nganasan (belonging to the non-Finnic branch of the Uralic languages), in which the use of possessive markers as indicators of definiteness is relatively new and not yet obligatory. Hence these languages may offer insights into the emergence of the functional category of definite articles from a different point of view.

The original and still maintained function of the possessive suffix is to establish a possessive relationship between two (or more) entities and to express person and number of the possessor and in most cases also the number of the possessum, exemplified in (1) and (2). The suffix is realized on the possessum; an additional possession marker on the possessor is possible.

(1) Udmurt (Edygarova 2009:101)
    so-len   eš-ez
    he-GEN friend-3SGPOSS
    'his friend'

(2) Komi (Hausenberg 1998: 313)
    vok-ïs
    brother-3SGPOSS
    'his brother'

Despite from their function as possession markers the suffixes of the 3rd, 2nd, and in some cases even of the 1st person singular may indicate unique reference in Komi, Udmurt and Nganasan. Consider the following examples:

(3) Nganasan (Tereščenko 1979:95)
    məu-δu   sürü ŋilenu čimə
    earth-3SGPOSS is covered by snow
    'The earth is covered by snow'

(4) Komi (Hausenberg 1998: 313)
    lun-ïs   gaža
    day-3SGPOSS merry
    'The day is merry.'

(5) Udmurt (Csúcs 1998: 285)
    In gužđur vïlïn   turïn-ez   čeber
    On the meadow   grass-3SGPOSS beautiful
    'The grass on the meadow is beautyful.'

In these examples, the possessive suffix is interpreted as a definiteness marker. Hence, *earth, day* and *meadow* are not interpreted as being possessed by someone or something. In fact these suffixes occur in all typical uses mentioned before and can thus be taken as definite

articles. This so called "non-possessive use of possessives" (Fraurud 2001) gives rise to different interesting questions. The ones I would like to discuss in my talk are: Why do the languages investigated use possessive suffixes for the marking of definiteness? What's the "definite content" in a possessive marker and what uses may offer a starting point for the development towards a definiteness marker? It will be argued that the choice of whether the 2nd or the 3rd person singular suffix is used as definiteness marker depends on the referent of the respective noun: Referents which are assumed to be closer to the adressee (e.g. emotional affected or well known) often bear the 2nd person singular suffix whereas the 3rd person singular suffix seems to indicate a rather distant relationship between the referent of the marked noun and the adressee.

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