

On possessives as markers of definiteness (oral presentation)

Languages that mark definiteness often possess definite articles that grammaticalized from demonstratives. Less commonly (or maybe simply less well studied) there are languages that express definiteness with markers that derive from possessives.

Typical contexts in which nouns are (potentially marked) definite include (a) direct anaphoric use (“... *a house*. *The house is...*”) and (b) associative anaphoric use (“... *a house*. *The roof is...*”). In English, definite articles alternate with demonstratives in (a) direct anaphoric use, whereas in (b) associative anaphoric use they alternate with possessives (Fraurud 2001):

- 1 a) *Besides the barn there is a little cottage. The/This cottage... (*Its cottage...)*
 b) *Besides the barn there is a little cottage. The/Its roof... (*This roof...)*

It can be assumed that the grammaticalization demonstratives→articles starts from (a) direct anaphoric contexts, whereas the starting point of the grammaticalization possessives→articles lies in (b) anaphoric use. Once a possessive occurs in (a) direct anaphoric use, i.e. in a context where there is no longer a possessor, it is fully grammaticalized as a definite article. This situation seems to be the case in Uralic languages and Amharic.

Standard Persian does not possess a definite article, but in colloquial Persian (own data) the 3sm possessive occurs remarkably often in definite contexts where European languages like English cannot use a possessive:

- 2 *tup-esh khub-e.*
 ball-3sPOSS good-COP
 ‘The ball is good.’

Example (2) can be said while playing a game, without previous mentioning of *tup* ‘ball’. The possessive suffix *-esh* does not refer to a possessor of *tup* either, but associates it with an anchor, which is the actual speech situation. Despite its high frequency in situational contexts like (2), but also in (a) or (b) and others, the use of *-esh* does not seem to be fully obligatory (cf. Himmelmann (2001: 839) who also mentions that ‘possessive articles’ often are not obligatory).

Gumer (Gurage, Ethiosemitic) also employs the 3sm possessive suffix (*-əta*) to mark definiteness (own data). However, in contrast to the related Amharic, e.g., the possessive is not the only means, but is in opposition to a definite article that goes back to the 3rd person personal pronouns (and ultimately to demonstratives) *-x^wit(a)* 3sm, *-x^wit(a)* 3sf, *-xino* 3pm, *-xinəma* 3pf. Gumer distinguishes systematically between the above two contexts: in (a) direct anaphora the definite article is used, whereas in (b) associative anaphora the possessive suffix is employed:

- 3 *at kərə k^witara(∅) yi-cək^wr-i. [...]*
 one day chicken 3S-cook.IPFV.IPS-3smO
k^witara-x^wita cəkkər-x^w-in-im.
 chicken-DEF.sm cook.PFV-1sS-3smO-M
bə-cəkkər-x^w-in ank^wə ɪxa-ta x^wə-x^w-in-im.
 in-cook.PFV-1sS-3smO after water-3smPOSS spill.PFV-1sS-3smO-M
 ‘One day one cooked chicken. [...] I cooked **the** chicken. After I had cooked it, spilled **the** water.’

References

Fraurud, Kari. 2001. Possessives with extensive use: A source of definite articles? In: Irène Baron, Michael Herslund, Finn Sørensen (eds.). *Dimensions of Possessions*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: Benjamins. 243-267.

Himmelmann, Nicklaus P. 2001. 62. Articles. In: Haspelmath, M./König, E./Oesterreicher, W./Raible, W. (eds.), *Language Typology and Language Universals*. HKS 20.1. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter. 831-841.