

Definiteness, possessivity and exhaustivity: formalizing synchronic and diachronic connections

Many formal semantic and typological studies have addressed the relation between possession and definiteness, where definiteness encompasses uniqueness- and antecedent-based reference resolution or weak and strong definiteness in the sense of Schwarz (2009).

Morphosyntactic and semantic split alignment. From the point of view of morphosyntax, there is a typological split between languages that allow possessive and definiteness markers to cooccur within one and the same DP (1), and those in which the markers in question are in complementary distribution (2) (for a rich typological survey see Haspelmath 1999).

RUSSIAN

- (1) et-a moj-a podrug-a
this-F.SG my-F.SG friend-NOM.SG
‘this (female) friend of mine’

ENGLISH

- (2) *this his friend / ^{OK} this friend of his

On the semantic side, languages again split in that some have markers of possession that impose an exhaustive quantification on the domain denoted by the possessee nominal (in the sense that the resulting DP is normally taken to denote the totality of individuals with the relevant nominal property related to a given possessor), while other languages do not have such possessives.

West Germanic prenominal possessors (3), French prenominal possessors, and Hebrew and Arabic construct state possessives (4) (e.g. Heller 2002, Dobrovie-Sorin 2004, Barker 2011) all encode exhaustive quantification. For instance English (3) is felicitous just in case all of Sam's daughters study in Great Britain, not just some of them, and Hebrew (4) in case the teacher has only one house.

ENGLISH

- (3) Sam's daughters study in Great Britain.

HEBREW

- (4) beyt-ha more
house-DEF teacher

“The teacher’s house” (from Barker 2011)

In languages and language groups such as Italian, Spanish, Slavic, Finno-Ugric, Austronesian (Chung 2008), there is no possessive configuration with an exhaustivity effect. For example, in (5) and (6) from Russian and Beserman Udmurt (Uralic, Finno-Ugric), respectively, the possessee NP is not presupposed to denote all of the individuals with the relevant nominal property related to the possessor, but possibly only some of them.

RUSSIAN (SLAVIC)

- (5) nash petukh
 our rooster

“our rooster / one of our roosters”

BESERMAN UDMURT (URALIC)

- (6) petuk-mâ
 rooster-POSS.1PL

“our rooster / one of our roosters”

Moreover, there is evidence for the typological alignment of the morphosyntactic and semantic splits identified above. That is, on the one hand, it is precisely in those cases where possessive markers trigger exhaustive quantification that they are in complementary distribution with definiteness markers; on the other, languages which do not have exhaustivity-triggering possessives, seem to mark, if at all, specificity (in the sense of Enç (1991); partitive type in terms of von Heusinger 2002) rather than definiteness. The latter clustering of properties is illustrated with (5) and (7) from Russian and (6) and (8) from Beserman Udmurt (Finno-Ugric).

RUSSIAN

- (7) et-ot nash petukh
 this-M.SG our rooster

“this rooster of ours”

BESERMAN UDMURT

- (8) So korka-mâ vuž n’i val.
 this house-POSS.1PL old already be.PST

“This house of ours became old”

One the goals of this workshop is the identification of systematic alignments between the morphosyntactic and semantic splits described above and the exploration of the semantic and/or structural underpinnings of the alignments.

Diachronic transition between the two types of systems. The two types of systems – with article/possessive complementary distribution and exhaustive possessives and with articles/possessive cooccurrence and no exhaustive possessives – are not impermeable, however. For instance, Medieval French went from a system with the pre-nominal possessives cooccurring with the articles originating from Latin distal demonstratives, (9) to a system where the two series of markers are in complementary distribution, (10) and where the pre-nominal possessives have an exhaustive interpretation, (11).

MEDIEVAL FRENCH

- (9) la sue juvente fut honeste e spiritel.
DEF POSS.3SG youth was virtuous and spiritual

“His youth was virtuous and spiritual.” (From *La vie de St. Alexis*, approx. 1050 A.D.)

MODERN FRENCH

- (10) (*La) sa jeunesse était très spirituelle.
DEF POSS.3SG youth was very spirituality

“His youth was very spiritual.”

- (11) Mes amis ne viennent pas ce soir.
POSS.1PL friends NEG come.3PL NEG this evening

“My friends are not coming tonight.” (= no friend is coming)

Examination and formalization of such diachronic transitions is the second major goal of the meeting.

Finally, a connection seems to emerge between the etymological origins of definiteness/specificity markers and whether their semantics involves exhaustive quantification. As shown in Schroeder (2006), the main diachronic sources of definiteness/specificity markers belong either to the domains of direct anaphora (demonstratives, personal pronouns) or to the domains expressing associative relations (which includes possessive markers).

- (i) Definiteness encoding originating within the domain of direct anaphora, which is commonly assumed to involve the relation of identity with an antecedent, historically gives rise to the definite articles (see e.g. De Mulder and Carlier 2011). Within the Russellian/Fregean approach, these articles have been held to trigger an exhaustive quantification over the nominal domain (modulo relevant domain restrictions). This is for instance the case of the West Germanic articles.
- (ii) Non-exhaustive possessives which are grammaticalized as reference markers (Schroeder 2006 typically give rise to non-exhaustive interpretation, compare (6) from Beserman Udmurt.
- (iii) Similarly, the specificity markers in some Ethiopian languages and Indonesian (Rubin 2010), which have also developed from possessives, also do not encode exhaustivity.

However, etymology does not categorically determine the presence/absence of the exhaustivity component and a non-exhaustive configuration may develop into an exhaustive one. For instance, Khanty (Uralic) has developed an antecedent identity-based definiteness marker from a third person possessive marker.

Goals of the workshop Taking as its core business the relation between possession, reference, and exhaustivity, the workshop focusses on answering the following questions:

- How much typological evidence is there for the alignment between (non)-cooccurrence of definiteness and possessive markers and possessor (non)exhaustivity?
- What are the possible semantic explanations of the ban on possessive and definiteness markers' cooccurrence in light of the alignment of morphosyntactic and semantic splits?
- What is the inventory of syntactico-semantic elements that would allow to account for the independence of exhaustive quantification and possessive relation cross-linguistically?
- What are the possible inventories of possessive constructions in languages in terms of (non)exhaustivity?
- How much diachronic evidence is there for the passage from non-exhaustive to exhaustive possessive configurations?
- How can such transitions be formally modeled?
- How can we formally model the evolutionary developments leading from the direct anaphora and possession markers to the definiteness and specificity (partitivity) markers respectively?

The workshop is aimed at bringing together specialists working on the formal (synchronic and diachronic) representations of the structure and the semantics of the DP and the scholars engaged in the data-driven research on particular languages featuring any of the phenomena above.

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