

Why third person singular possessive suffixes are suitable as definite determiners

Languages that use possessive suffixes as definite determiners (like Indonesian, Turkic and Uralic languages, see Himmelmann 2001 for a summary) almost always apply the third person singular suffix in this function, illustrated in the following two examples:

(1) Indonesian (Sneddon 1996:151, cited in Rubin 2010: 107)

Kalau mau makan nasi-nya di lemari.
If want eat rice-3SG in pantry
'If you want to eat, the rice is in the pantry.'

(2) Indonesian (Sneddon 2006: 38, cited in Rubin 2010: 109)

A: *Jadi gua ntar ketemu dia langsung di salon.* B: *Salon-nya di dekat rumah?*
So I soon meet her direct in salon Salon-3SG in near house
'So I'm going to meet her directly at the salon.' 'Is the salon near your house?'

In my talk, I would like to show why possessive suffixes are suitable as definite determiners and why the third person singular suffix is the best candidate for this additional function. First, possessive suffixes refer unambiguously to a previously established possessor (just like English possessive pronouns). Crucially, their definiteness pertains not only to the possessor but also to the head noun, the possessum. This is obvious with possessive constructions like *his father* or *my head* but utterances like *my brother* are in principle ambiguous since I might have several brothers. However, the use of a possessive suffix (or in English a possessive pronoun) indicates that there is only one discourse-important and salient brother, accordingly the whole NP with a possessive suffix refers unambiguously. This way, a possessive suffix always indicates the unique reference of its host noun.

Second, a third person possessive marker is the best candidate because (i) it is the most neutral person in a three-person system, quite parallel to demonstrative systems where usually the distal demonstrative serves as grammaticalization source for definite articles; (ii) it allows for various possessors, either human or animate or inanimate – at least in languages without an alienability split in adnominal possessive constructions; (iii) third person possessive suffixes can be ambiguous with respect to reference: In a sentence like *Peter washed his car* the possessive pronoun *his* (corresponding to a possessive suffix in Indonesian) is not necessarily co-referent with the subject *Peter*. Accordingly, the third person possessive suffix is not restricted like first or second person suffixes to certain referents but allows for different referents. I additionally suggest that these (also cognitively based) differences between first and second person on the one hand and the third person on the other hand also lead to weaker agreement with third person possessors. This in turn makes a third person possessive suffix prone to take over further functions, to bleaching mechanisms (in terms of grammaticalization) and finally to indicate the unambiguous reference of a noun in Indonesian languages just like definite articles.

References:

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- Sneddon, J. N. (1996) *Indonesian: a Comprehensive Grammar*. London and New York: Routledge.