

Mapping the postposed demonstrative in North Eurasia with a special focus on North Russia

This paper discusses an areal feature in Northern Eurasia: The use of a postpositioned demonstrative as a marker of definiteness and topicality. The construction is observed broadly from Saamic and Finnic languages in the west, to Turkic and Tungusic languages in the east (Tauli 1966: 148). In Haspelmath's (2010) terminology, these languages share a common 'comparative concept' of expressing information structure with a demonstrative-derived element. On the level of 'descriptive categories', in different micro areas, the historical demonstrative may synchronically fall into a word class different from demonstrative.. For instance, the languages in Northwest Russia (Finnic, Saamic and North Russian dialects) employ a demonstrative word, which is attached as an enclitic to the head. Whereas, the languages in Central Russia (Mari, Permic, Ob-Ugric, Samoyedic and Kipchak Turkic) and North East Asia (Mongolic and Tungusic) use a 3rd person possessive suffix, which is etymologically derived from the demonstrative, too.

This paper pays a special attention to the contact zone of North Russia. It is noteworthy that the languages in this area have either lost the use of the possessive suffix (East Finnic and East Saamic) or did not have it in the first place (North Russian dialects). Replacing the lost possessive suffix or introducing a new element in the place of non-existent possessive suffix, the postposed demonstrative is, by form, still recognisable as an independent lexical unit. In writing these languages, the head word and demonstrative are explicitly separated with hyphen. Thus, the use of the postposed demonstrative does not display signs of becoming a suffix yet. In the languages of the eastern zones (Central Russia and North East Asia) the corresponding construction with the possessive suffix is morphologically more bound as a result of phonological reduction and grammaticalisation.

To trace the development in North West Russia, the lack and loss of a possessive suffix leave a free morphological slot in a postpositioned position. Given this free space, these languages have adopted under the areal pressure a similar strategy of expressing definiteness and topicality with a postposed demonstrative. In other words, they choose to follow an areal pattern rather than a common tendency amongst other Finno-Ugric and Slavic cognate languages. This study shows that areal diffusion can shadow genealogical inheritance and lead towards convergence. A mechanism of 'mutual reinforcement' in connection to marking of definiteness is applicable to other linguistic areas, too, such as Balkan Sprachbund (Lindstedt 2000).

References

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