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Possessive suffixes and their functions in Ugric languages

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English Summary

The Ugric languages Mansi, Khanty and Hungarian form a branch of the Uralic language family which is mainly spread across North-Eastern Europe and Siberia. Other prominent languages of the Uralic family are e.g. Finnish, Saami and Estonian. The Ob-Ugric languages Mansi and Khanty are spoken in Western Siberia along the Ob' river and its tributaries, thus they are referred to as Ob-Ugric. Their closest relative is Hungarian, spoken in Hungary and its neighboring countries. The status of the Khanty and Mansi languages is endangered: only 20% out of 8,000 ethnic Mansi and 30% out of 22,000 ethnic Khanty still speak their mother tongue, and there are nearly no monolingual speakers. In contrast, Hungarian is an official language of the European Union, spoken by about 15 million people. Hence, the status of literacy, language documentation and language education differs noticeably between Ob-Ugric and Hungarian.

From a typological point of view, the Ugric languages are basically so-called SOV languages, their morphology is mainly agglutinative, i.e. grammatical information is rather encoded with suffixes which are attached to the stem instead of using prepositions, pronouns or articles. The most accessible referent in a discourse is not overtly realized on the surface of the sentence. Its position remains empty (zero-anaphora). This is also revealed in rich paradigms of personal suffixes which are used instead. One set of personal suffixes is attached to nominal stems and called *possessive suffixes*. They are involved in the structure of so-called attributive possessive constructions in most Uralic languages. As revealed in their denomination, research on possessive suffixes in Ugric languages, as in most Uralic languages, has primarily viewed them in the light of their function as markers of possessive relations, traditionally referred to as their prototypical use.

The linguistic concept of possession seems to be universal. The notion of possession itself, though, is purely abstract and can only be understood as a »broader concept of association or relationship between two nouns«. While the definition is an abstract collective term, there is a broad consensus among linguists that certain prototypical meanings are covered by the concept of possession. These are: part-whole relations, kinship relations (both by blood and marriage), ownership relations as well as a fourth column covering all kinds of association in general (e.g. attribution, properties or orientation/location). The use of attributive possessive constructions is very frequent in most Uralic languages and, in a considerable amount of

cases, a possessive reading of the relation is excluded, even in the most abstract interpretation of possession. Such cases, where the so-called prototypical use of possessive suffixes (i.e. denoting a possessive relation) fails to serve as an explanation, are frequently subsumed under the node of non-prototypical use and a secondary, non-possessive function is attributed to possessive suffixes. This secondary function is for instance likened to the properties of a definite article.

In my eyes, this approach does not satisfy the features of possessive suffixes in many aspects: there is no inherent possessive meaning, it is the default-interpretation of the relation expressed with a possessive construction and often based on cultural and social values. If they limit the use of the construction in one language, this is not necessary the case in other languages, too. Possessive suffixes are morphological markers used in constructions denoting relations traditionally referred to as possession. In consequence, there is no such prototypical use of possessive suffixes and thus no secondary function. Instead, both, the prototypical and the non-prototypical use is an outcome of the very same property of possessive suffixes: as a set of personal markers, they establish reference.

The aim of my study is thus to provide a semasiology-based description of possessive suffixes in Ugric languages. The interpretation of the relation expressed is not the focus. An investigation of possessive suffixes as markers of definiteness is not intended. Not only the occurrence of the possessive suffix, but also the realization of the referent encoded (noun, pronoun or zero anaphora), is considered. The constructions are not analyzed in isolation but in the context of the whole discourse.

Although the majority of data represents the third person singular possessive marker, the whole paradigm is subject to investigation. All nominal stems are considered: while the possessive suffix is in most constructions attached to a noun, other constructions with possessive suffixes, such as verbal nouns and postpositions are also part of the analysis.

The work is corpus-based and mainly framework-free. The theoretical background is limited to terminology: the cognitivists' terms »reference-point«, »reference-point construction« and »target« are employed in order to avoid the biased terms »possessor« and »possessee«. Since referentiality is considered as the crucial aspect for the use of possessive suffixes, the principles of information structure are applied. The results might serve as a starting point for further reanalysis and reinterpretation of possessive suffixes and the denomination used to describe them.