

The exponence of caseless NPs in Moksha¹

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In this paper, I discuss two sets of markers in the Uralic language Moksha. Traditional grammars refer to these as indefinite and definite declensions (Koljadenkov & Zavodova 1962), however, I argue that it is not (in)definiteness that distinguishes the two, but the size of the nominal constituent involved.

Background: Moksha reference grammars divide nominal morphology into three declensions: indefinite, definite, and possessive. Nouns in the *indefinite* declension are typically used to refer to indefinite entities (cf. *st'ər'-n'ə-n'd'i* in (1)), while *definite* declension nouns usually denote definite entities (cf. *pan'cf-t'* in (1)).

Following Cinque (2002) and Déchaine & Wiltschko (2002), I assume that not all noun phrases have to be of the same syntactic size. Some may contain fewer projections ('small nominals' per Pereltsvaig 2006) and have different syntactic properties due to their reduced structure.

My analysis is based on my own fieldwork (elicitation) conducted in the villages of Lesnoje Tsibajevo and Lesnoje Ardashevo (Republic of Mordovia, Russia) in 2014-2017 and on further remote work with the same consultants in 2018-2019.

Evidence against the relevance of (in)definiteness: The *indefinite* declension can actually be used to refer to definite entities in some contexts, e.g. 'this year' in (2). Moreover, the *definite* declension is also possible in indefinite contexts (3).

Morphosyntactic properties: First, the *indefinite* declension exhibits number neutrality (4), while in the *definite* declension singular and plural have different forms (5a, b).

Second, *definite*-genitive possessors must agree with the head noun (6), while *indefinite*-genitive possessors cannot do so (7).

Analysis: I argue that the *definite* declension is used to mark full DPs; these DPs have number distinctions and are visible to the agreement probe. On the other hand, the *indefinite* declension is the exponence of small nominals (NPs); they are underspecified for number and lack features relevant for agreement. The restrictions on genitive dependents provide further evidence for this analysis. Two full-DP dependents cannot co-occur within one enclosing nominal (8). As (8) shows, this restriction is independent of agreement. Note also that there is no semantic restriction against multiple possessors: compare (8) with the well-formed (10).

In contrast to full DPs, more than one small nominal can be present within an enclosing nominal (9). Moreover, DPs can co-occur with small nominals (10). Therefore, *-n'* is a marker of small nominals (more specifically, caseless NPs) rather than case.

Theoretical implications: The existence of a special marker for small nominals in Moksha supports the hypothesis that there can be nominal phrases of different sizes within one and the same language. The distribution of small nominals is also relevant for theories of case licensing within the nominal domain. First, configurational theories of case (Marantz 1991; Baker 2015) would have trouble with the apparent presence of two genitive dependents inside one noun phrase (10). Small nominals, on the other hand, are not considered to be case competitors, and the problem does not arise. Furthermore, much work has indicated a ban on two full DPs co-occurring in "close quarters" (Alexiadou and Anagnostopoulou 2001; Richards 2006). The occurrence of two genitive DPs would violate this ban. The same work suggests that one way to circumvent this ban is to

¹ This research is supported by RFBR grant № 19-012-00627.

reduce the structural size of one of the offending DPs. Here, I have shown an option not fully considered in that work, in which both of the relevant DPs are reduced simultaneously, (9).

Examples:

- (1) *mon kaz'-in'ə pan'čf-t' jomla st'or'-n'ε-n'd'i.*
1SG.NOM present-PST.3.OBJ.1SG.SUBJ flower-DEF.SG.GEN little girl-DIM-INDEF.DAT
'I presented **the flower** to a little girl'.
- (2) *s'in' mora-s'-t' kancerca kodamə bəd'ə [t'ε kizə-n'] morə.*
they sing-PST.3-PL concert.IN which INDEF**this** year-INDEF.GEN song
'At the concert they sang a song associated with this year'. (Pleshak & Kholodilova 2018: 282)
- (3) *[kodama bəd'ə pan'čf-n'ə] puž-s'-t' n'i.*
which INDEF flower-DEF.PL.NOM droop-PST.3-PL already
'Some flowers have already drooped'.
- (4) *t'ε ras't'en'ijε-n' kor'et'-t'n'ə [this plant-INDEF.GEN root-DEF.PL]*
'the roots of this plant/of these plants'
- (5) a. *t'ε ras't'en'ijε-t' [this plant-DEF.SG.GEN]* 'of this plant'
b. *t'ε ras't'en'ijε-t'n'ən'* [this plant-DEF.PL.GEN] 'of these plants'
- (6) *t'ε ras't'en'ijε-t' kor'en'-əc / *kor'en'-c' ašč-i škatulka-sə-n.*
this plant-DEF.SG.GEN root-3SG.POSS.SG.NOM root-DEF.SG.NOM be.situated-NPST.3SG
box-IN-POSS.1SG
'The root of this plant is in my box'.
- (7) *t'ε ras't'en'ijε- n' kor'en'-c' / *kor'en'-əc ašč-i škatulka-sə-n.*
this plant-INDEF.GEN root-DEF.SG.NOM root-3SG.POSS.SG.NOM be.situated-NPST.3SG
box-IN-POSS.1SG
'The root of this plant is in my box'.
- (8) **t'ε c'ora-t' mašina-t' šari-sə(-nəzə) var'ε-n'ε.*
this boy-DEF.SG.GEN car-DEF.SG.GEN wheel-IN-POSS.3SG hole-DIM
Intended: 'There is a hole in [this boy's_{Possessor} wheel_{Possessum} of the car_{Possessor}]'.
that girl-DIM-INDEF.GEN this plant-INDEF.GEN root-DEF.SG.NOM
'the root_{Possessum} of this plant_{Possessor} that belongs to that girl_{Possessor}'
- (10) *t'ε c'ora-t' mašina-n' šari-s' urdaz-u.*
this boy-DEF.SG.GEN car-INDEF.GEN wheel-DEF.SG.NOM dirt-ATTR
'[This boy's_{Possessor} wheel_{Possessum} of the car_{Possessor}] is dirty'.

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