

On the Article-like Use of the Px2Sg in Dolgan, Nganasan and Some Other Languages in an Areal Siberian Context¹

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In Stachowski 1998 wurde gezeigt, dass das Possessivsuffix der 2. Person Sg. im Norddialekt des Dolganischen unter nganasanischem Einfluss die Funktion eines bestimmten Artikels erfüllen kann. Im vorliegenden Artikel wird B. Pakendorfs (2007) These, dass dieser Gebrauch des Possessivsuffixes auf ewenkischen Einfluss beruhe, sowie dass die Erscheinung im Dolganischen wie im Jakutischen eine gemeinsame Quelle habe, diskutiert. Zum Schluss wird nahegelegt, dass dieses Phänomen, das einerseits das Jakutische mit dem Selkupischen und andererseits das Dolganische mit dem Nganasanischen verbindet, möglicherweise zur Festlegung von zwei Spracharealen beitragen kann: „Tajmyr-Areal“ und „(Ur)Selkupisch-(Ur)Jakutisches“ Areal.

Ten years ago I published a short article (Stachowski 1998) showing that the Px2Sg (= possessive suffix of the second person singular) can be used with the function of the definite article in the Northern dialect of Dolgan. Since the construction is completely untypical of a Turkic language, I suggested that it was developed under the influence of Nganasan.

Some months ago, B. Pakendorf (2007) published a study addressing the same problem, and it is to her merit that she was able to present four Yakut sentences in which the Px2Sg was also used as a definite article.² This material was unknown to me earlier, and it makes the phenomenon even more interesting. Pakendorf is of course quite right when she says that the Nganasan adstratum cannot be used to explain the origins of the phenomenon in Yakut because of the geographical distance between the two languages. Her own solution to the problem is as follows: “[...] if one postulated Samoyedic influence in Dolgan, one would have to argue that the extended use of possessive suffixes in Sakha

¹ I would like to thank M. Knüppel (Göttingen) for commenting on a draft of this article.

² Possessive suffixes of the 1st and those of the 3rd person singular, too, can be used with the same function in some Siberian languages. However, they will not be discussed in this paper which is exclusively devoted to the use of the Px2Sg.

and Dolgan developed in very similar ways [...] under two different contact situations. It is therefore more probable that this structural influence took place once in the common ancestor of Sakha and Dolgan, and that Evenki was the model language” (Pakendorf 2007: 233).

I must admit that I fail to understand what Pakendorf means when she says that the phenomenon would have developed “in very similar ways [...] under two different contact situations”. This fact, however, is not especially important. By contrast, an important part of Pakendorf’s article is the presentation of the Evenki material. This, however, consists of one sentence only which suggests that the article-like use of possessive suffixes is a rather rare situation in Evenki. To this, two Udihe sentences with the same construction are added. One cannot but raise some objections:

[1] The Udihe live on the river Ussuri. The distance between Yakutsk and the Ussuri approximately equals that between Yakutsk and Taimyr. Which means that the possibility of an Udihe influence on Yakut approximately equals that of the Nganasan one, and the latter was rightly excluded by Pakendorf herself.

[2] The Udihe sentences are as follows (ibidem 231):

[2a] *bi oloxiwə mēnsalāmi əsimidə wā oloxiŋ̄ sus’a*
 ‘I shot the squirrel but didn’t get it. The squirrel (lit. my squirrel) escaped’

The word *oloxiŋ̄* ‘my squirrel’ can be understood both literally (= the possessive use) and figuratively (= the article-like use). The example is not sufficiently unequivocal. – Cf. [2b].

[2b] *si Sergejŋ̄ əs’ə mamasala*
 ‘Hasn’t your Sergey married’

Without a broader context, it is rather hard to guess why one should not interpret the phrase ‘your Sergey’ possessively. What is more, the name Sergey is preceded by the pronoun *si* ‘you’ (2Sg), whereas substantives with the Px2Sg used as a definite article are not preceded either by a personal or a possessive pronoun. The combination of a personal pronoun and a possessive suffix can only have a possessive sense. (This same concerns *mutatis mutandis* the example [2a]). Ergo: the phrase *si Sergejŋ̄* can only be understood possessively.

[3] The Evenki sentence is (ibidem):

[3a] *tar munnukaŋiv tuksamalčaran*
 ‘That hare (which I saw or tried to chase) ran away quickly’

I am not really sure that *tar munnukaŋiv* should not be just translated as ‘that hare that I am talking about’. – The demonstrative pronoun *tar* ‘that’ at the beginning of the sentence makes the use of a definite article rather unnecessary, at least from the semantic point of view. If there really were such a grammatical necessity, one would probably find this rule mentioned in every grammar.

In short:

- [2a] is ambiguous but, generally speaking, possible; only, it has the Px1Sg (combined with the pronoun *bi* ‘I’), not 2Sg;
- [2b] displays no article-like use of the Px2Sg;
- [2a] + [2b] are from Udihe, i.e. they are useless in our context;
- [3a] is uncertain and it shows the Px1Sg, not 2Sg.

In other words: we have at our disposal not a single case of the Evenki Px2Sg used as a definite article.

Still, the problem remains: How should the article-like use of the Px2Sg in Dolgan and Yakut be explained, if this is no indigenous feature, and a Nganasan influence upon Yakut is out of the question?

First, I do not feel any necessity to seek a single common source of the phenomenon in Dolgan and Yakut. In fact I do not think, there ever was one. Otherwise, one would rather expect to find the phenomenon in both the Northern and the Southern dialect of Dolgan.

Secondly, we have to keep apart the article-like use of the possessive suffixes of the 1Sg, 2Sg, and 3Sg. If language A uses the Px2Sg with this function, it cannot be readily interpreted as a trace of the influence of language B which uses the 1Sg or the 3Sg possessive suffix but never the Px2Sg. Only when we understand the original interrelations between the three possibilities, shall we be in a position to decide whether they actually represent or do not represent one and the same evolutionary process.

For the time being we observe two facts:

- the article-like use of the Px2Sg is untypical of the Altaic languages (the Northern Dolgan dialect being the only idiom in which it occurs relatively often);
- the article-like use of the Px2Sg is typical of the Uralic languages (it is generally accepted to be a Proto-Uralic heritage)³.

³ Cf. e.g. ОФУ 270, § 4: “Корни данного употребления уходят в прауральскую эпоху”. – The fact that this phenomenon is unknown in Finnish and Hungarian results from the later areal influence of European languages (Hajdú 1994: 66, § 10). – I do not feel competent to decide whether the Ostyak form *sapəten* ‘dein Hals’ (attested in a semantic context in which the Px2Pl *-ən*, i.e. *sapətən* ‘euer Hals’ would rather be expected, see Widmer 1999: 467 and 470, fn. 2) might be also interpreted as ‘der Hals’, that is with the Px2Sg *-en* used as a definite article.

In this situation, it is only natural to derive the Altaic phenomenon from a Uralic source.

The Yakuts have admittedly no contact with Uralic languages today. However, as is well known, they evolved into a nation from at least two migration waves coming to today's Yakutia from the South, probably from a territory somewhere between the Sayan Mountains and the Lake Baikal. Also intensive contacts between Turkic and Samoyedic languages in Southern Siberia, especially in the Sayan Mountains, are a commonly known fact. And the Sayan Samoyedic languages had of course left some traces in Turkic before they definitively perished.⁴

The first Proto-Yakuts reached the river Lena in the 15th or 16th century. The first Proto-Dolgans migrated away towards Taimyr in the first half of the 17th century (Stachowski 1996, esp. p. 128sq.). And in the 17th century, the Samoyed-speaking Kamas and Mator were still living in the Sayan Mountains, in a territory to the East of Turkic-speaking peoples whose Northern neighbours were the Selkup, another Uralic people (Долгих 1960). This geographical location and the consistent article-like use of the Px2Sg in Selkup are of paramount importance to us. (Today, this consistency can be best observed in sentences whose predicate is an imperative form [ОСЯ 188, 385]. However, this limitation does not seem to be of greater relevance to our context, especially because we do not know how old this special status of the imperative is)⁵. Unfortunately, we do not know anything about non-possessive functions of possessive suffixes in Kamas and Mator.

Let me briefly summarize what I have said so far:

- The Dolgan and the Yakut usage should not be connected into one topic.
- Since we have at our disposal not a single case of the Evenki Px2Sg used as a definite article, the Evenki influence is out of the question.
- The article-like use of the Px2Sg should be kept apart from that of 1Sg and 3Sg, unless and until we are sure that they all represent one and the same process.
- The article-like use of the Px2Sg is another areal feature in Siberia. It should be examined in possibly all Siberian languages. For the time being, it is best observed in Uralic and seems to have spread thence into some Altaic languages.

⁴ For the historical background see Joki 1952 and Хелимский 1991, Helimski 1997. – For some linguistic reflexes of these contacts see Helimski 1995 and Helimski/Stachowski 1995.

⁵ Peculiarly enough, the Yakut imperative, too, distinguishes its direct object, though in another way. Namely, it has the form of the partitive case which in its turn almost never occurs in other syntactic contexts, i.e. with other verbal forms. I do not dare to decide right now whether this, too, is an areal feature but it surely deserves attention.

If common features of Uralic and Altaic actually result from long-lasting areal contacts of the two language families (as for the first time proposed by W. Kotwicz in his posthumously published 1951 monograph – see Stachowski 2001: 217), the article-like use of possessive suffixes surely does not belong to the oldest elements borrowed into Altaic from Uralic since it is, in Altaic, only represented in scattered peripheral languages. Consequently, the feature does not belong either to the “primary” or to the “secondary interaction” in Janhunen’s (2007: 81 sq.) classification. It is rather to be placed in a later phase of the Samoyed substratum influence upon Turkic.

The use of the 1Sg, 2Sg or 3Sg in separate Siberian languages in order to express the definiteness makes an impression of an “unfinished experiment”. One cannot rule out the possibility that the phenomenon, also in Uralic, initially originated in a Siberian substrate language that is no more accessible to us. But this possibility cannot be proved.

The article-like use of the Px2Sg is a link connecting Yakut with Selkup. If one could also find some other common features of the two languages, one could postulate the former existence of a linguistic league or area⁶. Also the Dolgan-Ngasan parallel, alongside with their geographical neighbourhood, suggests the possibility of closer connections. Both languages could probably supplement the proposals discussed in Helimski 2003. In which case, Dolgan and Nganasan would form a “Taimyr area”, and the Yakut usage would bear witness to the former “(Proto-)Selkup-(Proto-)Yakut area”.

Be that as it may, the fact is that Helimski’s study on leagues in Siberian linguistics (2003) opens up new perspectives and stimulates further research on linguistic areas and leagues in Siberia. The article-like use of the Px2Sg seems to be a new candidate for a criterion in Siberian areal linguistics – one that at least partly corresponds to another isogloss, also suggested by Helimski for Samoyedic, but twenty years earlier: the evolution of $*s, *š > *θ > t$ (Хелимский 1983: 6 sq.), a phenomenon which has parallels in Siberian Turkic, as well, e. g. Yak. *kytar-* = Tkc. *kyzar-* ‘rot werden’ < $*-z-$ (GJV 94, § 23.2) and, at the same time, Yak. *üös* = Tkc. *öt* ‘Galle’ < $*-t$ (GJV 91, § 22.2) – in a more detailed manner see Stachowski 1999: 234-239 (cf. also Stachowski 2001: 215 sq.)⁷. I am not quite certain whether both the Px2Sg isogloss and the $*s \sim t$ isogloss may be connected with what Helimski (2003: 160) calls the ‘Ostyak (Ob-Yeniseic) Sprachbund’ – an examination of this possibility is another task for the future.

⁶ For problems with criteria and definitions of linguistic league/area see Urban 2007.

⁷ T. Tekin (1976) tried to explain the phenomenon in Yakut. However, he mainly concentrated upon Yakut and did not allow for a broader Turkic and Siberian context.

In any case, we are only at the very beginning of serious research on linguistic areas and leagues in Siberia. Helimski did his bit. The Px2Sg will maybe do likewise.

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