The Somali microscope: pronouns, determiners and possession

I. Introduction and proposal. Somali overt morphology makes visible material that syntactic and semantic theory encodes covertly within the general nominal domain. We analyze Somali ‘long independent pronouns’ as φ-feature stems suffixed with ordinary determiners, and make the crosslinguistic claim that pronouns have an ordinary DP structure and semantics. This supports slightly modified versions of proposals by Postal (1969) and Elbourne (2002). Our analysis raises expectations about the exponence and distribution of determiners in Somali. We provide case studies on different pronominal paradigms and possessives, concluding that Somali features both a null definite determiner and an overt possessive determiner that does not encode definiteness (Schoorlemmer 1998 for other languages). Our data comes from the literature (Saeed 1999; Green et al. 2015), fieldwork with three native speakers and web searches.

II. Complex pronouns.
1. The determiner. An overt determiner, -ga/-da, is identified in (1), where we compare masculine and feminine lexical DPs (a,b) with pronouns (c,d).

(1) a. guri-ga house.M-DET.M b. mindi-da knife.F-DET.F c. ani-ga 1s-det.m d. iya-da 3s.f-det.f

Determiners on pronouns are rare in the literature (attested in Lakhota, Schwarz 2012). The variety of determiners that attach to lexical nouns in Somali also surface with pronouns: -gee, ‘which’ (Saeed 1999); -gii, the tensed determiner (Lecarme 2008); and demonstratives. This is evidence that pronouns contain a grammatically transparent and productive overt determiner.

2. The φ-feature stem. The determiners above agree in grammatical gender with a φ-feature stem. Further evidence that the stems in (1) encode φ-features comes from independent environments. This is visible in the segmental overlap between the stems in (1c,d) and subject clitic forms, which typically occur on sentence level ‘focus markers’ (Green et al. 2015).

(2) a. waxa FOC (citation form) b. waxa=aan (> waxaan) FOC=1s c. waxa=ay (> waxay) FOC=3s.f

III. Short independent pronouns. Short independent pronouns are similar in distribution to long ones. They have a φ-feature stem but no overt determiner: ani, ‘I,’ iya, ‘she’... We argue that short independent pronouns encode definiteness by means of a null definite article. Evidence for the availability of a null definite article in Somali comes from ‘inalienable’ (Green et al. 2015) possessive constructions.

(3) a. hooya-day(-∅/*-da) b. macalima-day-da
    mother.F-1S.POSS-DET.F teacher.F-1S.POSS-DET.F
    my mother my (female) teacher

IV. Possession. Possessive morphology consists of: A possessive determiner encoding the semantics of possession and the φ-features of the possessor, -kay- in (4); A determiner, -ga/-da. Both determiners agree in gender with the possessed NP, not with the possessor. Compare (3b)-(4).

(4) macalin-kay-ga teacher.M-1S.POSS-DET.M
    my teacher

We argue that -ga encodes definiteness of the possessed NP, while -kay denotes a possession relation.

V. Conclusion and outlook. Somali morphology is a probe into the structure and semantics of (pro)nominals. Simple definite determiners, null and overt, and the possessive are the focus here. Further research will examine the occurrence of other determiners within the (pro)nominal domain.