The definite article and its range of definiteness in Moghamo

Achiri Blasius, University of Buea

Abstract

Two morphologically distinct definite articles are used in Moghamo to mark definiteness in the N(oun) P(hrase).[1] One type consists of the vowel stem *-e* that takes one of five different singular and plural concord consonant prefixes, each corresponding to a set of noun classes and their prefixes. Another type which invariably occurs as the morpheme *ngu* is used with any noun irrespective of class and number. The indefinite article also occurs as a stem *-mɔʔɔ* that marks noun class agreement, though differently by rather taking the class prefix of the noun itself. In addition, both definite and indefinite NPs may occur without any visible article, thus a null article. Attempts have been made to explain how definiteness is marked in languages with/without obvious markers as in Cheng and Sybesma (1999, 2012) and Dikken (2007) for example. In this paper, I discuss definiteness in the Moghamo NP, looking at (a) the consequences of these Moghamo facts on existing analyses of definite NPs, and (b) what levels of definiteness are denoted by the various forms of both the definite and indefinite articles in the language.

1. Introduction

In many languages, a definite noun phrase is usually accompanied by an overt definite article (pre-posed or post-posed depending on the language) as exemplified in the following English examples:

(1)   a.   John Paul is **the man** whom we spoke about last night.

          b.   I have spoken with **the man**. I think **the man** is not honest.

          c.   Mary-Christy has come with **the baby**.

          d.   **The lion** doesn't bask in **the sun**.

In (1a) for example, the highlighted expression *the man* that includes the definite article *the*, has a definite referent *John Paul*, construed through the definite article to be known already or recently talked about by the hearer. The highlighted expressions in (1b-d) are all definite in nature by virtue of containing the definite article *the*. In (1b), there are two sentences, the highlighted definite NP in the second one having the same definite reference as in the first sentence, and the latter is well established within the context of the conversation. In (1c), the baby in question is also well established within the context of the conversation. In (1d), the noun *lion* is used to denote a whole unrestricted set/class of individuals and therefore could be a definite noun used with the definite article; meanwhile *sun* is used in the construction as the only entity of its kind within the context of the relevant conversation, and so is definite and occurs with the definite article.

      The definite article in Moghamo may occur as the root vowel *–e* which takes one of five consonant beginnings depending on the noun class of the corresponding definite noun, and so can surface as **we**, **ze**, or **fe** when the noun is singular, and **te**, or **mbe** when

---

[1] Moghamo is a Grassfields Bantu language spoken in North-West Cameroon and the data I will use in this paper are drawn from the Ngamambo dialect of which I am a native speaker. The dialect is spoken in the Santa sub-region. In the paper, therefore, my use of Moghamo is restricted to this particular dialect.

the noun is plural. If we render (1a) into Moghamo, one of these five forms, precisely **we**, will appear with the Moghamo word for *man*, *we* being used normally in the environment of a noun of the singular human class. If the same is done for (1b), the –*e*-type definite article will be used in the first of the two sentences, but will not be used in the second, given the level of definiteness of the noun – rather, a completely different type of definite article will surface, namely, *ngu*, which remains invariable and is not marked for concord. In (1c), either of the two types may surface with the noun, or, literally speaking, none of them may surface, yielding a null definite article, also depending on the level of definiteness of the noun. Finally, in (1d), both nouns would occur with a null definite article each. Consider the Moghamo examples in (2) below.

(2) a. Ngó' Regwì ye'e **wèd** **we** ne tè ná ghàm …
-- COP man the REL SUJ1PL T speak
'N. R. is **the man** whom we spoke about last night.'

b. Mé fe ghàm mbi **wèd** **we**. Mé kond gha
SUJ1SG T speak with man the SUJ1SG think that
wèd **ngú** …
man the
'I have spoken with **the man**. I think **the man** is not honest.'

c. Bigh Lùm fe ye'e mbi **wan**.
--- T come with child
'B. L. has come with **the baby**.'

d. **Èrfòn** er ze tséí er sàng nyot ka' **ertshwè**.
C.lion C(AGR) T NEG C(AGR) bask self in C.sun
'**The lion** doesn't bask in **the sun**.'

Thus, three different forms of the definite article are used in Moghamo, and the occurrence of each one of them certainly depends on the degree of definiteness they represent.

Like the definite noun phrase, the indefinite noun phrase in many languages is also usually accompanied by an overt indefinite article. In Moghamo, like the –*e*-type definite article, the indefinite article also occurs as a stem -*mɔ̀ʔɔ* that marks noun class agreement, though differently by rather taking the class prefix of the noun itself as illustrated in (3a-b), and the indefinite noun phrase may occur without it as in (3c).

(3) a. **Wán** **mɔ̀ʔɔ** na yene nga nep.
C.child C.a T walk.IMPT in house
'A child was walking in the house.'

b. Me fe zeh **fibig** **fimɔ̀ʔɔ** gu mbò'.
SUJ1SG T see C.knife C.a on shelf
'I have seen a knife on the shelf.'

c. Ghím ne a yè'ê, níng **fíká'à**.
time REL SUJ2SG come. IMPT take C.stick
'when coming, take a stick.'

(3c) thus shows that the Moghamo indefinite article also exhibits a null form.

In this paper, I examine the morpho-syntactic and semantic ramifications of the use of the definite article in Moghamo, and establish the different degrees of definiteness represented by the different forms of it. The paper thus proceeds into three main sections. In section 2 that follows, I consider the noun class system of Moghamo with its concord system to gain insight knowledge of the various forms of the article in the language. In section 3, I consider works by Cheng and Sybesma (1999, 2012) and den Dikken (2007) that attempt to explain how definiteness is marked in languages with/without obvious markers, and look at the consequences of the Moghamo facts on them. In section 4, I then present an analysis of the various forms of the definite and indefinite articles in the language, showing that each of them corresponds to the semantic context within which it is used. The paper ends with a brief conclusion in section 5.

References
Cheng, Lisa Lai-Shen, and Rint Sybesma. 1999. Bare and not-so-bare nouns and the structure of NP. *Linguistic Inquiry* 30:509–542.
Cheng, Lisa lai-Shen and Rint Sybesma. 2012. Classifiers and DP. *Linguistic Inquiry* 43:634-650.
den Dikken, Marcel. 2007. Amharic Relatives and Possessives: Definiteness, Agreement, and the Linker. *Linguistic Inquiry* 38:302-320.