On definiteness in Gumer (Gurage)

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The present paper on definiteness marking is based on my own fieldnotes on Gumer, a variety of the West-Gurage cluster of languages/dialects (South Ethiosemitic) spoken some 200 kilometers south-west of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia.

Languages that mark definiteness often possess definite articles that grammaticalized from demonstratives. Less commonly there are languages that express definiteness with markers that derive from possessives, among them Uralic languages and Amharic.

Typical contexts in which nouns are (potentially marked) definite include (a) direct anaphoric use ("... a house. The house is...") and (b) associative anaphoric use ("... a house. The roof is..."). In English, definite articles alternate with demonstratives in (a) direct anaphoric use ("... a house. This house is...") whereas in (b) associative anaphoric use they alternate with possessives ("... a house. Its roof is...").

In Gumer, definiteness is less grammaticalized as in European languages like English and occurs in less contexts. There are three possibilities to mark definiteness. Besides a maker -we, which will not be treated here, Gumer employs two other means to indicate definiteness: a definite article that goes back to the 3rd person personal pronouns (and ultimately to demonstratives) -xʷɨt(a) 3sm, -xʸɨt(a) 3sf, -xɨno 3pm, -xɨnəma 3pf; and the 3sm possessive suffix -əta. Here, Gumer does not show an optional alternation of the markers but distinguishes systematically between the above two contexts: in (a) direct anaphora the definite article is used, whereas in (b) associative anaphora the possessive suffix is employed.