

Definite, pseudo-definite, and possession in Humburi Senni (Songhay, Mali)

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Although HS belongs to the tightly-knit Eastern Songhay block, alone among Songhay languages it has innovated pronominal-possessor paradigms for nouns and postpositions. There is no compelling language-contact explanation.

*(True) definite nouns end in a suffix, plus a floating high tone ("H") detached from the proto-suffix (DefSg *-òó, DefPl *-éy). A 3rd person alienable possessor precedes the possessed noun, which has pseudo-definite form (segmentally definite Sg or Pl, but with terminal falling tone contour and no floating H): háns-ó+H '(the) dog', à háns-ò 'his/her dog'; háns-éy+H '(the) dogs', à háns-èy 'his/her dogs'. 1st/2nd person possessors combine the pseudo-definite with outer pronominal suffixes: háns-è (<*/háns-ò-e/) 'my dog', háns-ò-nôŋ 'your-Sg dog'. Plurality of the possessed noun is expressed, for 1st/2nd possessor, as [[NOUN-ey]-Pron], as in [háns-èy]-nôŋ 'your-Sg dogs', except for 1Sg [[Noun-Pron]-ñon] with the outer Pl suffix (háns-è-ñon 'my dogs'), suggesting that 1Sg -e is no longer transparently from /-o-e/.*

With 3rd person possessor, inalienable nouns (kin, body) are morphologically true definite Sg or Pl with lexical tones and +H. 3Sg possessor à is absent: bà:b-ò+H 'his/her father' (not #à bà:b-ò). 1st/2nd forms add suffixes directly to the bare stem: bà:b-èy 'my father', bà:b-àŋ 'your-Sg father'.

Postpositions likewise have new pronominal paradigms, morphologically inalienable (innovated) for 1st/2nd person and alienable (inherited) for 3rd: Dative sé, 3Sg à sé, 1Sg s-éy, 2Sg s-àŋ. "Postpositions" therefore precede 1st/2nd person suffixes. This paradigm likely originated in noun-based postpositions ('head', 'place/home').

*Alienable and inalienable 1st/2nd suffixes derive from independent pronouns, e.g. 1Sg -e and -ey from ây (*ăy), 2Sg -noŋ and -aŋ from nî: (*nî).*

The development of head-marking nominal/postpositional morphology has a limited analogue in verbs, which have a new suffixal 2Sg imperative that has morphophonological similarities to alienable possession.