

From plural possessives to associative plurals. Sketching the grammaticalization path

A category of associative plural (ASP) realized as ‘X and his/her family’ or ‘X and his/her associates’ or ‘X and his/her group’, depending on a specific language, is found in many languages of the world, where X is most often an individual proper name. The paper treats one specific morphological expression of this category and suggests a hypothesis of its grammaticalization.

In some languages with morphological ASP, the ASP marker is more or less transparently connected to the possessive + plural marker (PssPl). Cf. Bulgarian *Mari-in_{Poss}-i_{Pl}* ‘Mary and her family’. The important thing about this apparently possessive form is that its reference includes Mary herself, which is impossible for plural possessives *stricto sensu* in many other languages as well as for headed plural possessives in Bulgarian. To the best of our present knowledge, similar forms are attested in Georgian, Tsez, Yaqui. Less transparent cases are presented e.g. by Hungarian, Polish and, probably, Lezgian. Although far from being the most widespread type of ASP, these ‘possessive’ ASPs are attested in different parts of the world and thus need some explanation.

In very general terms, a connection between plural personal possessives and associative plurals is not surprising. Indeed, the relationship between a person X and *his/her* associates corresponds to the possessive component of the form, while the plural reflects the necessarily plural reference of the associative plural form. However, some details remain unclear. Logically, it is not obvious what semantic kind of various possible possessive relationships connects X to other people associated with him. Also, if the plural applies to associates as the morphological structure indicates, why ASP may refer to ‘X + one associate’ with only one associated member. In other words, there is a certain functional distance between associative ‘X and his/her associates’ and possessive ‘objects/people associated with X’.

It seems that data from Slavic may to some extent shed light on the history of PssPl → ASP development. In Bulgarian, ASP is formed on individual proper names, both feminine and masculine, and is identical to headless plural possessive: e.g. *Mari-in_{Poss}-i_{Pl}* ‘Mary and her family’, *Stojan-ov_{Poss}-i_{Pl}*. On the other hand, in Russian, which does not have either ‘possessive’ or any other grammaticalized ASP, certain similarities to Bulgarian may be observed. Indeed, in colloquial Russian headless possessives formed from individual proper names have default reference to the members of the name’s referent’s family. Cf. singular feminine possessive in *Pet’k-in_{Poss}-a opjat’ gul’ajet* ‘Peter’s wife/daughter makes merry again’. These forms are best formed on diminutive proper names, which probably reflects the register they are used in. Headless possessives may also refer to *inanimate objects belonging* to the referent of the stem, but, unlike default family interpretation, this needs an introductory context and sounds elliptical, e.g. *Moja ruchka uzhe konchilas’, a Vas-in_{Poss}-a jeshe pishet* ‘My pen is out, and [that of] Basil’s still has ink’. The latter usage is available for any register, is not restricted to proper names, and is by no means conditioned by the use of a diminutive.

Headless plural personal possessives also by default denote family relations – *Mashk-in_{Poss}-y_{Pl} ujekhali* ‘Mary’s [family] is gone’ is fine, while *Mashk-in_{Poss}-y_{Pl} slomalis* ‘Those of Mary broke’ is unnatural when taken out of the context. In other words, there is some tendency for headless personal possessives to be interpreted as referring to a relative/the relatives. In Russian, this is also true of headless pronominal possessives (*moja, tvoj* etc.; cf. also French *les siens* ‘his/her relatives’, Italian *i miei* ‘my family’).

There is still quite a way to go from Russian headless plural possessive ‘X’s family’ to Bulgarian headless plural possessive ‘X and his/her family’ and it is not obvious what direct evidence could give us a clue to what makes plural possessive go this way. Probably, the inclusion of X into the reference of the plural possessive form is merely a shift from possessive to a neighboring and attractive (in terms of its cross-linguistic high occurrence) functional slot of ASP.

Thus, I suggest that grammaticalization of ASP from headless plural possessives in Slavic includes two stages. First, headless possessives become functionally specified to refer to relatives, then the referent of the stem is included into the reference of the plural possessive thus specified. Although the ASP itself arises only at the second stage (referent inclusion), the first stage (semantic specification) probably is a necessary prerequisite of the second one.

Different stages of this grammaticalization are observed in different languages. Polish forms in *-owie* and Hungarian forms in *-ék* seem to (almost) necessarily include the referent of the stem, it may be argued that this marking may have developed from the former possessive marker plus plural marker. Georgian forms in *-ianebi*, although not a default type of possessive in contemporary language, may easily refer to a group excluding the reference of the stem (e.g. *Giorg-ianebi* ‘George and his associates’ or ‘George’s associates’) which may be interpreted as a trace of their recent possessive past. Bulgarian headless plural possessives have regular possessive morphology and may either include or exclude the referent of the stem (e.g. *Mari-in-i* ‘Mary and her family’ or ‘Mary’s family’). Russian has already specified headless possessives in denoting family relationships but one has still to wait until it includes the referent of the stem.