# Contextual function of noun marking in the direct object–marking system of Eastern Mansi

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## 1. Introduction

My aim in this article is to outline the roles of different morphological devices used for marking the direct object in Eastern Mansi (EM), with an emphasis on noun marking. I will show how the functions of verb agreement and noun marking differ in marking the direct object. Furthermore, I will outline the roles of the accusative case and possessive suffixes in direct object marking.

The theoretical basis of my study is information structural analysis, the basics of which will be presented in Section 3. In this study I mainly rely on the information structural definitions and terms presented by Lambrecht (1994).

In the following sections, I will show how the whole direct object marking system in the Middle Konda dialect of Mansi is based on pragmatics. In particular, I will outline the role and functions of noun marking, which is quite different from that found in more familiar European languages. As in many other Uralic languages, in EM not all direct objects are explicitly marked (Havas 2008). Those that are marked are primarily marked on the verb. Noun marking has a secondary role in direct object marking: it is more likely to complement the task of verb agreement.

My research material is taken from the folklore collection gathered by Artturi Kannisto in the early 1900s and published some decades later (WV; Kannisto 1951, 1955, 1956, 1958 and 1963), which can be considered a vast and diverse database representing different text genres. The collection consists of six parts: I *Texte Mythischen Inhalts* [Mythological texts], II *Kriegs- und Heldensagen* [War songs, heroic songs], III *Märchen* [Tales], IV *Bärenlieder* [Bear song], V *Aufführungen beim Bärenfest* [Performances at bear ceremonies] and VI *Schicksalslieder* [Fate songs], and includes text patterns from all main dialects of Mansi. The data used for this article includes more than 1,000 active transitive clauses collected from Kannisto's texts in the Middle Konda dialect, which belongs to the Eastern dialects of Mansi. The data cited in this article has been phonetically transcribed according to the notational system created by Kulonen for the specific needs of EM. This transcription was first presented in her Eastern Mansi grammar

(Kulonen 2007: 9–24). The original texts were written by Kannisto using Finno-Ugric transcription (FUT).

In Section 2, I will introduce the Eastern Mansi language. The theoretical basis of my study is presented in Section 3. Section 4 is devoted to the direct object marking system in general, and the results and conclusions concerning the role of noun marking are discussed in Sections 5 and 6.

## 2. Eastern Mansi language

Mansi is a Uralic language spoken in Western Siberia. There are four main dialectical groups of Mansi: Northern, Easten, Southern and Western. These main groups are traditionally considered dialects, but the differences between them are so significant that I prefer to talk about the Mansi languages and the Eastern Mansi language. There are also separate grammars created for the Northern and the Eastern Mansi languages (Kálmán 1989, Kulonen 2007).

According to the Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger by Unesco[1], Mansi is a critically endangered language: only 24% of the 11,400 Mansi people alive today speak Mansi. Only the Northern Mansi language is still spoken. The Northern Sosva dialect is the only variant for which a written standard has been created.

Eastern Mansi, which is now extinct, was spoken near the Konda River. There used to be four Eastern dialects: Upper-Konda, Middle-Konda, Lower-Konda and Yukonda. Today all Eastern dialects have vanished. For this reason, my study is based on written sources; my research data is gathered from the folklore collection compiled by Artturi Kannisto roughly 100 years ago. My research data is presented in Section 1.

From a typological point of view, EM is, like all the Uralic languages, an agglutinative language: grammatical relations are primarily expressed using suffixes. In comparison to other Uralic languages, EM has relatively few grammatical cases: there are only 7 cases. There are two verb conjugation categories in the active – the subjective and objective conjugations – but only one past tense form. What is remarkable is the frequency and varied uses of the passive voice: the personal passive is used as the inverse category of the active voice. A passive clause often includes a lative-marked agent, so a passive clause can have all the same arguments as a transitive active clause. Expressing impersonal action is only one of the functions of the passive, and it is quite marginal.

All the Mansi languages contain three grammatical numbers: singular, dual and plural. Both verbs and nouns can be inflected in all three numbers.

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[1] Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger by Unesco,
http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/index.php

Possession is expressed with possessive suffixes, as in the majority of the Uralic languages; there is no genitive case in EM. In terms of syntax, EM has SOV word order. As presented in the last sections of this article, word order also plays a role in direct object marking (see Section 6).

## 3. Information structure and topicality

Information structure is the formal expression of the pragmatic structuring of a proposition in a discourse (Lambrecht 1994: 5). Lambrecht emphasizes that information structure refers to the "structuring of propositions into portions which a speaker assumes an addressee already knows" (Lambrecht 1994: 7). In other words, information structural analysis can show how sentences are structured based on what the speaker assumes the addressee does and does not know.

There are two kinds of relations between denotata and propositions: the *topic relation* and the *focus relation* (Lambrecht 1994: 335). The topic is often described using the word *aboutness*. Lambrecht (1994: 188) has defined the topic as "the thing which the proposition expressed by the relation of the sentence is about". Consequently, the topic is an element that is already known: the speaker expects it to be familiar to the addressee.

Focus is the exponent of new, non-recoverable information: something that the speaker does not expect the addressee to know yet. According to Lambrecht (1994: 207), focus is "the unpredictable or pragmatically non-recoverable element in the utterance".

In the event that a sentence has several topics, we can differentiate between the *primary* and *secondary* topic. Nikolaeva (2001) introduces secondary topics in Khanty, the language most closely related to Mansi. She presents the concepts of primary and secondary topics as subcategories of clause-external topics and distinguishes them as follows: "The primary and secondary topic have essentially the same properties but to different degrees: the primary topic is more important, continuous and recurrent than the secondary topic" (Nikolaeva 2001: 11). Consequently, primary topics very often tend to occupy the place of the subject in a clause, and secondary topics occur as direct objects. The topical direct objects presented in this article represent secondary topics.

There are certain difficulties that arise when data is gathered from a historical corpus and information structural analysis is applied without access to corpora of present-day spoken language. Petrova and Solf (2009) have discussed these questions and dispensed with the idea of assigning the main categories of topic and focus directly (Petrova & Solf 2009: 144). However, despite Petrova and Solf's statements, I have ended up essentially following Nikolaeva and the terminology used in her studies. The aim of my study is to find out the referential factors affecting variation in direct object

marking. For that purpose, using the main categories – *primary topic, secondary topic, and focus* – is sufficient.

## 4. Pragmatic direct object marking in EM

The phenomenon of pragmatics comprises the context's contribution to the meaning (Matthews 1997). In addition, the information structural analysis presented in the previous section contains a pragmatic perspective on the language. The whole direct object–marking system in EM relies on pragmatics: the morphological marking of a direct object depends on the context in which it is presented. Pragmatics is the major referential factor affecting the variation in direct object marking. For example, animacy (Aissen 2003) does not contribute to the variation at all.

Both verb agreement (*objective conjugation*) and case marking (*accusative case*) are involved in direct object marking. Possessive suffixes also play a role in the marking system of direct objects. There are two verb inflection categories: the subjective conjugation and the objective conjugation. The subjective conjugation expresses only the person and number of the subject:

(1)  *jäl-s-äg,      jäl-s-äg,      söät    eel      towl-øs*
     go-PST-3DU    go-PST-3DU    seven   year     pass-PST
     'They went on and on, seven years past.'
     (WV I: 1B)

The objective conjugation also express the number of the direct object:

(2)  *õõw-mø      öät      kont-iiløm*
     door-ACC    NEG      find-SG<1SG
     'I do not find the door.'
     (WV I: 14B)

However, not all direct objects are marked with the objective conjugation. As Havas (2008) has stated, it is a typical feature of several Finno-Ugrian languages that only some of the direct objects are explicitly marked. This is what is called differential object marking (DOM) (Aissen 2003). According to earlier studies (Skribnik 2001, Nikolaeva 2001) and my own data, the direct object–marking system in Mansi is based on topicality; topical direct objects are explicitly marked, whilst focal direct objects are not. (For definitions of topic and focus, see Section 3.) Verb agreement is the primary method used to mark direct objects; whenever a direct object is topical, it is marked with the objective conjugation. Often the direct object is indicated only with an objective conjugation suffix, without any nominal object constituent. This is called zero anaphora (see Section 4.2).

In (3) and (4), the focus-objects are unmarked. In (3), the land is brought

into the discussion at the outset; the speaker does not expect it to be known by the hearer.

(3)    *kåtøx-kar-ään*        *løl-øng*     *mõõ*    *tåt-ii?*
        which-human-SG2DU    soul-ADJ    land    bring-3SG
        'Which one of you brings me live land?'
        (WV I: 1B)

(4) refers to women in general, not any particular woman. The direct object is unspecific and in focus position:

(4)    *nee*        *öät*     *uusyøntöäl-i*
        woman    NEG    see-3SG
        'He does not see any woman.'
        (WV III: 7B)

In (3) and (4), the direct objects in focus position are morphologically unmarked. Later on, we can see verb-marked topical direct objects. Zero anaphora, or a gap in a phrase or clause that has an anaphoric function similar to the pro-form (Matthews 1997), is very frequent is Mansi. In EM, highly topical subjects or objects are often referred to only by a cross-reference to the verb.

In (5) and (6), the highly topical objects are only marked on the verb. In (5), the man has hunted a wood grouse and brought it home. The direct object is already known, and the speaker can expect it to be recognized by the addressee:

(5)    *kom*     *juw- tee-s-tø*
        man      PREF-eat-PST-SG<3SG
        'The man ate it (the wood grouse).'
        (WV I: 12B)

(6) refers to a foreigner who has broken into someone else's house. The house owner is asking if he should be attacked.

(6)    *öät*     *pårøwl-iilään?*
        NEG    assail-SG<2DU
        'Don't you assail him?'
        (WV III: 7B)

Objective conjugation can also be accompanied by a nominal object constituent that has accusative case inflection or includes a possessive suffix.

There are two paradigms of the accusative case: the absolute and the possessive. The absolute accusative is the "simple" paradigm, having only one suffix for the singular, one for the dual, and one for the plural forms. The possessive accusative expresses not only the existence of a direct object but also the person and number of the possessor and the number of the possessee:

(7) *söät*    *lont*    *wöänt-øtääm*    *wø-s-tø*
    seven    goose    flock-ACC.SG3SG    take-PST-SG<3SG
    'He took his flock of seven geese.'
    (WV III: 7B)

Possessive accusative appears only with some third-person forms; with all the other persons, a possessive suffix is used alone (Section 5.2.2.):

(8) *ääk-øn*    *komøly*    *woåxtl-øs-løn!*
    uncle-SG2SG    how    leave-PST-SG<2SG
    'How could you leave your uncle?'
    (WV I: 14B)

## 5. The role of noun marking in the direct object–marking system

### 5.1. The functions of nominal object constituents

As mentioned in Section 4, verb agreement can also be accompanied by noun marking. A topical nominal object constituent can be marked with an absolute accusative case ending, a possessive accusative case ending or a possessive suffix.

On the basis of my data, I have divided the use of the objective conjugation accompanied by marked nouns into two separate functions: the *specifying* and the *emphasizing* functions. In the first case, the nominal object constituent is used to give more information about the direct object already referred to by an objective conjugation ending. In the second category, the direct object could be identified by context without expressing it using any nominal object constituent, but the speaker wants to give it special emphasis. These functions will be discussed in Section 5.1.1 and 5.1.2.

### 5.1.1. Specifying function

By "specifying function of noun marking" I refer to those situations in which a nominal object constituent is used to provide more information about the direct object. Even though the direct object has already been mentioned and the speaker can assume it to be familiar to the addressee, it has to be specified by a nominal component.

In (9) and (10), the function of the nominal object constituents is to specify the referent. The direct objects represent elements that have been under discussion but are not mentioned in the immediately preceding sentences. They are already familiar to the addressee, but the speaker cannot expect the hearer to identify the referent without repeating the nominal constituent.

(9)  *pojrøxøsy*      *nok-wø-s-ään*              *pupg-øt-mø*
     God             PREF-take-PST-PL<3SG        spirit-PL-ACC
     'God took the guardian spirits up to heaven.'
     (WV I: 15)

(10)  *luj-ootr-äg-mø*          *wot-öän!*
      down-prince-DU-ACC        call-IMP.DU<2SG
      'Call the two princes of the underworld here!'
      (WV I: 15)

The example sentence (11) is about Siberia, which is a generally known entity, but it has not been mentioned in the immediately preceding sentences in the story. The speaker cannot expect the addressee to recognize the direct object without identification with a nominal component.

(11)  *tøtø*      *syöär-t*      *syøpør-mø*      *äk*      *kääl-ii*
      this       world-LOC      Siberia-ACC      one       house-TRANSL
      *wöär-øs-tø*
      make-PST-SG<3SG
      'In this world he created Siberia as one single house.'
      (WV I: 14B)

The examples mentioned above include both animate (as in (9) and (10)) and inanimate direct objects (as in (11)). As already discussed in Section 4, my data shows that in EM, animacy does not contribute to the variation.

### 5.1.2 Emphasizing function

I use the term *emphasizing function* to describe those cases in which the nominal object constituent does not provide any new information but is used for the purpose of stressing or emphasizing the referent. The direct object is highly topical and could be identified even if it were referred to only with a verb ending. Still, the speaker wants to emphasize it with a nominal constituent.

In (12) and (13), nominal object constituents are used only to give special stress on the referents.

(12)  *öänsyøx-mø*      *tät*         *tø*          *wõõlt-øs-tø*
      bear-ACC          PARTIC        PARTIC        kill-PST-SG<3SG
      'So he killed the bear.'
      (WV IV: 26)

The bear in (12) has been mentioned several times in the previous sentences; it has been at the centre of the discussion, and the hearer has been told how the man goes hunting, fights against the bear, and finally kills it. The direct object could be identified without expressing it with a nominal object constituent. However, the nominal constituent is used to emphasize the

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action and to emphasize the bear, which is a sacred animal for the Mansi people. Killing a bear is not simply hunting but always also a mythological ceremony, a fact reflected in the linguistic expression.

In (13), the direct object is a second-person personal pronoun. In this context it should be clear who or what has been brought to the mentioned place, but it is still expressed with a pronoun:

(13)  *om      nää-n      jorøl      tåt-øs-løm      tøg*
      1SG     2SG-SG2SG   on.purpose  bring-PST-SG<1SG   here
      'I brought you here on purpose.'
      (WV I: 39)

According to my data, the expression of first- and second-person objects with zero anaphora is very rare: in 95% of cases, the first- and second-person direct objects were expressed using an accusative inflected personal pronoun.

## 5.2. Morphological devices used for noun marking

### 5.2.1. Absolute accusative

Among the possible noun-marking categories mentioned above, the accusative case is the most common, and it is also the primary noun-marking category. The other noun-marking devices are either sub-variants of the accusative or predominant forms appearing alone instead of in the company of the accusative ending.

Table 1 shows the absolute accusative endings (Kulonen 2007: 45):

| Sg | Du | Pl |
|---|---|---|
| -mø /-m / -øm | -iimø /-ägmø | -tmø |

Table 1

In Section 5.1, I have already presented several examples on the use of the accusative case and the situations in which it appears. Examples (9) through (13) all represent typical situations where the absolute accusative case appears.

### 5.2.2. Possessive accusative

Possessive accusative is a combination of an accusative case ending and a possessive suffix, which expresses the number and person of possessor(s) and the number of possessee(s). Possessive accusative appears only with third-person possessors with singular or dual possessees. With all the other forms, a possessive suffix is used alone. Table 2 shows the possessive accusative endings (Kulonen 2007: 52):

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|  | **Sg obj** | **Du obj** |
|---|---|---|
| **3Sg** | -ääm, -øtääm | -iimø |
| **3Du** | - | - |
| **3Pl** | - | - |

Table 2

According to my data, the possessive accusative covers the same function as the absolute accusative: it is used to mark topical direct objects. It appears with those direct objects that are topical and need to be possessive-marked, but only with a restricted number of third-person forms. The possessive-marked direct objects in focus position are discussed in Section 5.2.3.

In (14) and (15), the direct objects are topical, and they also require possessive marking. (14) refers to an axe that has been mentioned in the previous sentence, when the man was searching for it. Furthermore, it is the man's own axe, which needs to be expressed by a possessive suffix.

(14)  sågrøp-øtääm          kont-øs-tø
      axe-ACC.SG3SG         find-PST-SG<3SG
      'He found his axe.'
      (WV III: 7B)

(15)  öäsy-tääm              wot-äx       pümt-øs-tø
      grandfather-ACC.SG3SG  call-INF     start-PST-SG<3SG
      'He started calling his grandfather.'
      (WV I: 14B)

### 5.2.3. Possessive suffixes

Possessive suffixes express the number and person of the possessor(s) and the number of the possessee(s). As discussed in Section 5.2.2, possessive suffixes appear along with the accusative ending only in the third-person singular (known as the possessive accusative). In other cases, possessive suffixes predominate over the accusative ending and appear alone.

In (16) through (18), there are topical direct objects that include first- and second-person possessive suffixes:

(16)  öäsy-øn               ääj-øx       wot-ääløn!
      grandfather-SG2SG     drink-INF    invite-IMP.SG<2SG
      'Call your grandfather for a drink.'
      (WV I: 14B)

(17)  püw-syøsyk-øm  öät     tø        pümønt-øs-løm
      son-dear-SG1SG  NEG     PARTIC    command-PST-SG1SG
      'I have not commanded my dear son enough.'
      (WV I: 14B)

In (18), there is a possessive suffix with a third-person possessor and a plural object: this third-person form does not have a possessive accusative ending, and the topical direct object is marked using a possessive suffix alone.

(18)   *ton.tø.kar-ään*      *söärøsy-nø*    *noåløw*    *tø*    *rås-s-ään*
      that.thing-PL3SG    sea-LAT       to.water   so    throw-PST-PL<3SG
      'He threw all his belongings into the sea.'
      (WV III: 7B)

Some previous studies (Kálmán 1989: 60, Kulonen 2007: 137) have claimed that possessive suffixes always trigger the objective conjugation. Possessive suffixes have been regarded as markers of definiteness. In this position, they could be regarded as participants of the direct object–marking system.

However, despite earlier statements on the subject, my data shows that possessive suffixes do not trigger objective conjugation automatically. They denote possession, not definiteness or topicality. A possessive suffix can appear accompanied either by subjective conjugation or objective conjugation, depending on its level of topicality. A direct object in a possessed position is not always topical; it can also appear in focus position and be accompanied by subjective conjugation.

In (19), a possessive-marked direct object is accompanied by subjective conjugation:

(19)   *oltøn-wity-øng,*     *suurøny-wity-øng*   *jälpøng*    *toågl*-äät
      silver-water-ADJ    gold-water-ADJ      sacred      cloth-SG3SG
      *nok-posyg-øs*
      up-wrap-PST.3SG
      'He wrapped his silver and gold sacred cloth (an item of clothing) around his shoulders.'
      (WV I: 14B)

The direct object represents new information and is not verb-marked. Still, it needs to be marked for possession. Possessive marking and verb agreement of direct objects are not dependent on each other.

## 6. Other devices identifying the direct object

The direct objects that represent new information (focus position) are not morphologically marked; they are identified by other factors. Mansi is a language with SOV word order (Kálmán 1989: 65), and the direct object is often – but not always – placed immediately before the verb.

In addition, the predicate verb is always inflected according to the subject; in this way, the subject can always be identified and differentiated from the direct object. The subject is often expressed by zero anaphora: in my data, 10% of the sentences with subjective conjugation contain a nominal subject constituent, as in (20).

(20) *näg    nän    pøl       öän-øm     tow      keetø-s-løn?*
     2SG    why    PARTIC    1SG-1SG    there    send-PST-SG<2SG
     'Why did you send me there?'
     (WV I: 14B)

Personal pronouns are always inflected in the accusative case when they appear as a direct object. This makes sense, because a personal pronoun itself is a marker of topicality. An accusative form of a personal pronoun is constructed with the possessive suffix of the same person.

## 7. Conclusions

In the previous sections, I have outlined the functions of noun marking in the direct object–marking system in EM. The accusative is used for complementing verb agreement and has a secondary role in expressing direct objects. In relation to this subject, the most central question is: what is the function of the accusative case? Is it purely pragmatic, or more likely a stylistic detail? Do we really need the accusative case, or could the same information be expressed without the accusative ending? The accusative has disappeared in the Northern dialects of Mansi, and it has not been replaced with any other morphological item. In the Northern dialects, the nominal direct objects are not case-marked.

However, case marking of the object constituent is expected. The objective conjugation denotes high topicality of the direct object, but accusative marking identifies the target to which the objective conjugation refers. The main function of the accusative is to identify or emphasize the topical direct object, the topicality of which is already expressed by verb agreement. From this point of view, the verb agreement and case marking fulfill different functions within the direct object–marking system.

Possessive suffixes are used for expressing possession, not transitivity. Possessive suffixes are not used as markers of transitivity, but in cases where there is both a possessive suffix and an accusative case ending in the same word form, the accusative ending is omitted with certain forms (see Section 5.2.3). In other words, possessive suffixes predominate over the accusative case. These two suffixes appear together only in a limited number of cases: only in some third-person forms is it obligatory to use a possessive accusative ending which contains both the possessive suffix and the case ending.

## Abbreviations

ACC – accusative
ADJ – adjectiv
DU – dual
IMP – imperative
INF – infinitive
LAT – lative
LOC – locative
NEG – negation particle

PARTIC – particle
PL – plural
PREF – prefix
PST – past tense
SG – singular
TRANSL – translative
WV – Wogulische Volksdichtung

The objective conjugation suffixes are glossed as follows:
[number of object] < [person of subject][number of subject]; e.g., SG<1SG, DU<3SG.

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