

(In)definiteness spreading and multiple classifier constructions

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Abstract: Based on evidence from the Eastern Indo-Aryan language Magahi, this paper argues that Greek-type determiner spreading can occur not just with definite determiners, but also indefinite determiners and classifiers. This paper also defends a reduced relative clause analysis of such patterns (cf. Alexiadou 2014, Alexiadou & Wilder 1998), and argues against the proposed universal that “spreading” can only occur in languages that articulate their NPs singly (Plank 2003).

Keywords: *determiner spreading, reduced relative clauses, Magahi, definite determiners, numeral classifiers*

1 Introduction and background

There is a phenomenon in the syntax of modification called determiner spreading (DS) or poly-definiteness where what seems like a single noun phrase has multiple determiners (1).

- (1) Greek (Alexiadou & Wilder 1998: 303)
to megalo to kokino to vivlio
the big the red the book
‘the big red book’

The main syntactic puzzle of DS is the status of the “extra” determiners. If (1) was a single noun phrase with two simple adjectival modifiers, we would expect a single determiner. There have been many proposals for the syntax of DS, especially Greek DS (Alexiadou 2014, Alexiadou & Wilder 1998, Androutsopoulou 1995, Campos & Stavrou 2004, Kariaeva 2004, Kolliakou 2004, Lekakou 2017, Lekakou & Szendrői 2012, Panagiotidis & Marinis 2011, Tsiakmakis, Borràs-Comes & Espinal 2021, a.o.).

There has been less discussion of indefinite DS (2), likely due to its seeming infrequency. Indefinite DS is most commonly found in northern Scandinavian dialects.

- (2) Northern Swedish (Delsing 1993: 143)

en stor **en** ful **en** kar
 a big **an** ugly a man
 ‘a big ugly man’

In addition to “spreading” of determiners, I also consider patterns like the one in (3), where what looks like a single noun phrase has multiple classifiers.

- (3) Thai (Jenks 2006: 4)

farəŋ **khon** ruay **khon** ɲok
 westerner CLF rich CLF mean
 ‘rich, stingy westerners’

This is usually called the “Classifier-Modifier Construction” in Thai, but I will refer to such a construction as a multiple classifier construction (MCC).

The main claim of this paper is that it is possible for definite DS, indefinite DS, and MCCs to have the same syntactic structure. Previous proposals have claimed definite and indefinite DS must have different structures (Alexiadou 2006, 2014, Anderssen, Alexiadou & Lohndal 2019). Works on Thai MCCs sometimes offer a comparison to DS but diverge in the analysis (Hundius & Kölver 1983, Jenks 2006, 2011, 2012, 2018, Piriawiboon 2009), though Clausen (2022) is an exception in this regard. In particular, I argue that there are instances of (in)definite DS and MCCs that have a reduced relative clause (RRC) syntax, as originally proposed by Alexiadou (2014) and Alexiadou & Wilder (1998) for Greek DS. These arguments will be primarily based on new data from Magahi, an Eastern Indo-Aryan (EIA) language spoken in Bihar, India.¹ The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 gives data and background on the Magahi noun phrase. Section 3 provides background on DS and compares the Magahi pattern to Greek DS. Section 4 looks at indefinite DS in Magahi. Section 5 looks at MCCs in Magahi. Section 6 looks at why not all languages with DS have both definite and indefinite DS. Section 7 revisits and argues against a proposed universal of DS from Plank (2003). Section 8 concludes.

2 The Magahi noun phrase

Magahi is a numeral classifier language in the sense that classifiers are generally required for numerals and nouns to combine (Aikhenvald 2000). However, Magahi’s classifier inventory is very small with just two classifiers, *-go* (4) and *ṭho* (5), in free variation.

- (4) **chau-go** ām
six-CLF.INDF mango
 ‘six mangoes’

- (5) **chau ṭho** ām
six CLF.INDF mango
 ‘six mangoes’

Magahi has a nominal suffix *-wā* (allomorphs: *-wā*, *-bā*, *-ā*, *ā̃*, *-(i)yā*, *-(i)yā̃*, *-mā*; Sinha 1966), which requires a definite interpretation of the noun it combines with. Following Kumar (2020)

¹The Magahi data in this paper comes from elicitations done by the author with 5 native speakers.

and Sharma (2025), I am taking *-wā* to occupy the classifier position and will refer to it as the ‘definite allomorph’ of the classifier. The first reason for doing so comes from comparing the *-wā* definites to definite expressions in other EIA languages. Many EIA languages have a Numeral-Classifier-NP word order for indefinites and a NP-Classifier word order for definites. A comparison of Bangla (6) and Magahi (7) is given below, and parallel facts hold for Assamese (Goswami & Tamuli 2003) and Odia (Das 2022).

(6) Bangla (Dayal 2012: 204)

- a. *ek ta boi*
one CLF book
‘a/one book’
b. *boi ta*
book CLF
‘the book’

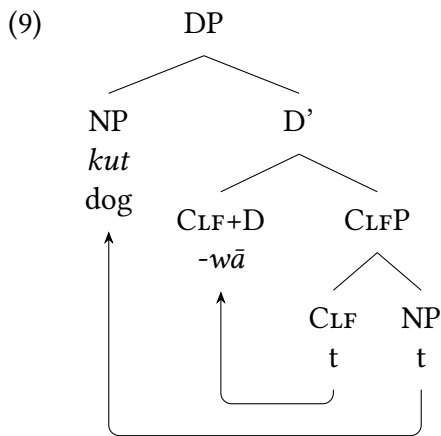
(7) Magahi

- a. *e-go kitāb*
one-CLF.INDF book
‘a/one book’
b. *kitab-bā*
book-CLF.DEF
‘the book’

Based on (6) and (7), *-wā* seems to appear in the same position that the classifiers appear in the other EIA languages. There is also a structure within Magahi itself which shows *-wā* occupies the classifier position. Magahi has a suffix *-kā* that attaches to adjectives, forming “long-form” adjectives (Grierson & Hoernle 1885). Adjectives suffixed with *-kā* can optionally also have a classifier after *-kā*, forming “redundant” adjectives. In indefinite noun phrases this classifier is realized as *-go* (8a) but in definite noun phrases it is realized as *-wā* (8b).

- (8) a. *e-go baṛ-k-ā-{go / #wā}* *kuttā*
one-CLF.INDF big-DET-M-{CLF.INDF / #CLF.DEF} dog
‘a/one big dog’
b. *baṛ-k-a-{wā / #go}* *kut-wā*
big-DET-M-{CLF.DEF / #CLF.INDF} dog-CLF.DEF
‘the big dog’

Saving detailed discussion of the syntax of these expressions for later sections, I take the alternation between *-go* and *-wā* to indicate they occupy the same position. Following Simpson (2005) on bare classifier constructions and Bhattacharya (1999a,b) on Bangla, I propose that *-wā* undergoes CLF to D head movement and the NP raises to SpecDP (9).



Adjectives that modify nouns suffixed with *-wā* are usually themselves suffixed with *-kā* for masculine nouns (10) or *-ki* for feminine nouns (11).

- (10) lam-k-ā laṛka-wā
tall-DET-M boy-CLF.DEF
‘the tall boy’

- (11) lam-k-i laṛki-yā
tall-DET-F girl-CLF.DEF
‘the tall girl’

Though descriptive works usually describe *-kā* in relation to *-wā*, it can also attach to adjectives modifying definite bare nouns² (12). And, as shown by Kumar (2022: 39), *-kā* can even occur in indefinite noun phrases (13).

- (12) okar choṭ-k-ā betā
3NH.GEN small-DET-M son
‘his younger son’

- (13) e-go baṛ-k-ā baet
one-CLF.INDF big-DET-M bat
‘a big bat’

As mentioned before, *-kā* can also be followed by the classifiers, meaning Magahi has both definite (14) and indefinite (15) MCCs. The rest of the paper is devoted to analyzing the syntax of these modified noun phrases, starting with a comparison to Greek DS.

- (14) baṛ-k-a-wā kut-wā
big-DET-M-CLF.DEF dog-CLF.DEF
‘the big dog’

- (15) e-go baṛ-k-ā-go
one-CLF.INDF big-DET-M-CLF.INDF
kuttā
dog
‘a/one big dog’

3 Determiner spreading

DS occurs in a number of languages, but not always with the same properties. Alexiadou (2014) compares DS in Greek (16), Hebrew (17), and Swedish (18).

- (16) Greek (Alexiadou 2014: 40)
to kokino to vivlio
the red the book
‘the red book’

- (17) Hebrew (Alexiadou 2014: 2)
ha smalot ha yapot
the dresses the nice
‘the nice dresses’

- (18) Swedish (Alexiadou 2014: 2)
den ny-a bok-en
the new-WEAK book-the
‘the new book’

The basic patterns look superficially similar, but Alexiadou notes that these patterns differ with respect to recursivity, predicativity, and restrictivity. More generally, adjectives in Greek DS are a kind of indirect modification (Cinque 2010, Sproat & Shih 1988).

²For details about the status of *-wā* definites and bare noun definites and the semantic and pragmatic differences between them including non-honorific uses of *-wā*, see Alok (2012, 2022) and Sharma & Chen (2026).

3.1 Recursivity

Greek DS is recursive (19), meaning there can be an “extra” determiner for each adjective.

- | | |
|--|---|
| (19) Greek (Alexiadou & Wilder 1998: 303)
to megalo to kokino to vivlio
the big the red the book
‘the big red book’ | (20) Magahi
baṛ-k-ā kar-k-ā kut-wā
big-DET-M black-DET-M dog-CLF.DEF
‘the big black dog’ |
|--|---|

Magahi (20) and Hebrew (21) are like Greek in this regard, but not Swedish (22).

- | | |
|---|---|
| (21) Hebrew (Sichel 2008: 300)
ha-šulxan ha-šaxor ha-arox šeli
the-table the-long the-black my
‘my long black table’ | (22) Swedish (Alexiadou 2014: 66)
den gamle (*den) snälle mann-en
the old *the kind man-the
‘the kind old man’ |
|---|---|

3.2 Predicativity

In Greek (23), adjectives such as ‘only’, ‘former’, or ‘current’ that cannot occur in predicative syntactic positions also cannot occur in DS.

- | | |
|---|--|
| (23) Greek (Alexiadou 2014: 57)
*o monos tu o erotas
the only his the love
Intended: ‘his only love’ | (24) Magahi
bartmān- *k-ā maṣṭar-wā
current- *DET-M teacher-CLF.DEF
‘the current teacher’ |
|---|--|

Magahi (24) behaves the same as Greek, while Hebrew (25) and Swedish (26) do not.

- | | |
|--|---|
| (25) Hebrew (Alexiadou 2014: 81)
ha-xaver ha-yaxid šel rina
the-friend the-single of Rina
‘the only friend of Rina’ | (26) Swedish (Alexiadou 2014: 66)
den förre president-en
the former president-the
‘the former president’ |
|--|---|

Besides *bartmān* ‘current’, other non-predicative adjectives that cannot occur with *-kā* in Magahi include: *kathit* ‘so called’, *bhāwisi* ‘future’, *diwangat* ‘late’, *ām* ‘common’, *becāra* ‘poor’, *dāhina* ‘right’, *bāya* ‘left’, and *khās* ‘special’.

3.3 Restrictivity

Adjectives in Greek DS must be interpreted restrictively, i.e. for DS of the form *the AP the NP*, the context must contain individuals that satisfy the NP predicate but not the AP predicate. The version of (27) without DS has two possible interpretations: i. there are only competent researchers and they will all be fired (non-restrictive) ii. the competent researchers are part of a larger group of researchers and only the efficient researchers will be fired (restrictive). The version with DS only has the restrictive reading.

(27) Greek (modified from Kolliakou 2004: 270)

O diefthindis dilose oti i kali (i) erevnites tha eprepe na
the director declared that **the competent (the) researchers** be should PRT
apolithun.
fired

‘The director declared that the competent researchers would be fired.’

Such interpretational effects are not found with multiple determiners in Swedish or Hebrew. However, in Magahi modifiers suffixed with *-kā* also require a restrictive interpretation (28).

(28) CONTEXT: You saw {#one dog, two dogs} yesterday.

baṛ-k-ā kut-wā baṛi sundar h-al-ai
big-DET-M dog-CLF.DEF very beautiful COP-PST-3NH
‘The big dog was very beautiful.’

Given these differences, a basic typology of DS emerges.

(29)

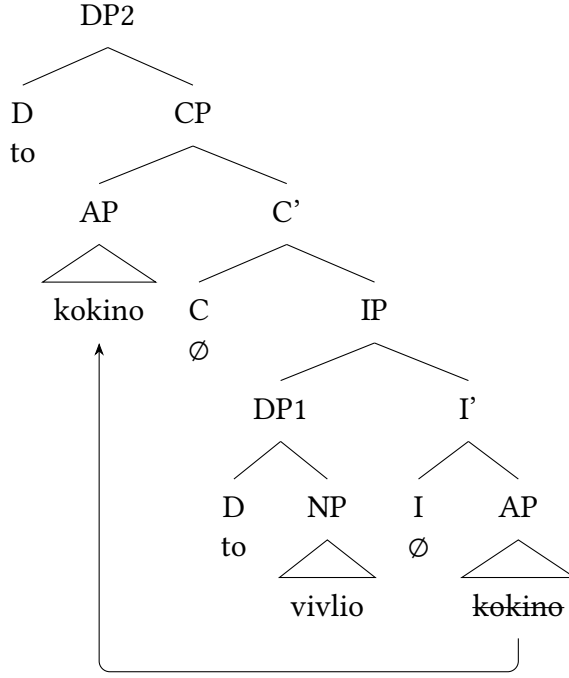
	Recursive?	Predicative?	Restrictive?
Greek, Magahi	✓	✓	✓
Hebrew	✓	✗	✗
Swedish	✗	✗	✗

Besides Magahi, Greek-type DS is argued to occur in Kipsigis (Kouneli 2019, 2021), Maltese (Winchester 2019), Rukiga (Asiimwe, Kouneli & van der Wal 2023), and Thai (Clausen 2022).

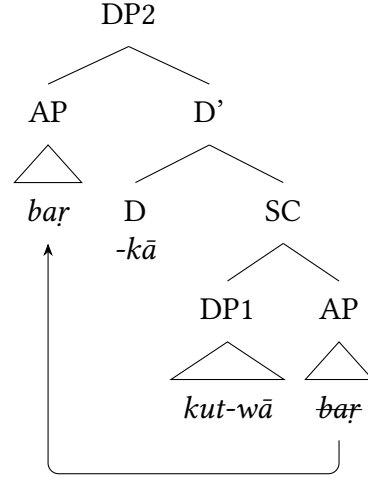
3.4 Analysis

Alexiadou (2014) and Alexiadou & Wilder (1998) build on the raising analysis of relative clauses in Kayne (1994). Specifically, they propose that DS occurs when a determiner takes a RRC complement with a subject DP and predicate AP. DS involves special ‘predicate-raising’ RRCs, in which the AP raises to SpecCP (30). This structure captures the discussed properties of Greek DS as follows: (i) recursivity – DP1, the subject of the RRC, could be another complex DP with a determiner introducing a RRC. (ii) predicativity – the adjectives are merged as predicates in a RRC. (iii) restrictivity – a characteristic of indirect modification (Cinque 2010, Sproat & Shih 1988). The RRC analysis extends to Magahi rather straightforwardly. In fact, it finds even more direct support from Magahi where *-kā* occurs with other types of RRCs. Magahi participial clauses are marked by a morpheme *-(a)l* and can also occur with *-kā*. These RRCs can be of various sizes, containing: just a verb (32), a verb and subject in a by-phrase (33), a verb and a direct object (34), and a verb and a time adverb (35). Examples (34) and (35) include auxiliary verbs in addition to the main verb in the RRC. These RRCs never occur with subject or allocutive agreement (Alok 2020, 2021), so while I am agnostic to their exact size and will follow Kouneli (2021) in labeling them as SC for small clause, they must at least be smaller than TP. The structure I propose for *baṛkā kutwā* ‘the big dog’ is given in (31).

(30)



(31)



- (32) **tut-al-k-ā** **gilas-wā**
break-PTCP-DET-M **glass-CLF.DEF**
 ‘the broken glass’

- (33) **rām ke** **dwāra** **likh-al-k-ā**
Ram GEN by **write-PTCP-DET-M**
kitab-bā
book-CLF.DEF
 ‘the book written by Ram’

- (34) **ām** **khā rah-al-k-i**
mango eat **AUX-PTCP-DET-F**
laṛki-yā
girl-CLF.DEF
 ‘the girl eating a mango’

- (35) **abhi bol** **rah-al-k-ā**
now talk **AUX-PTCP-DET-M**
laṛka-wā
boy-CLF.DEF
 ‘the boy talking right now’

The alternate landing site for the AP proposed here is due to a difference between Magahi and Greek concerning word order. Greek DS licenses an otherwise illicit noun initial word order, which is not possible in Magahi. Alexiadou (2014) and Alexiadou & Wilder (1998) propose that this word order derives from the lower DP1 moving to SpecDP2. In Magahi, I assume that the AP must move to SpecDP2 making that position unavailable to DP1.

4 Indefinite determiner spreading

While *-kā* is usually assumed to be definite (Sinha 1966, Verma 2003), we have seen that it can also occur in indefinite DPs (Kumar 2022). Now, I will show that even in indefinites *-kā* has the characteristic properties of Greek-type DS. In indefinites, DS with *-kā* is recursive (36), impossible with non-predicative adjectives (37), and restrictive (38)-(39).

- (36) choṭ-**k-ā** moṭ-**k-ā** kuttā
 small-**DET-M** fat-**DET-M** dog
 ‘a small fat dog’

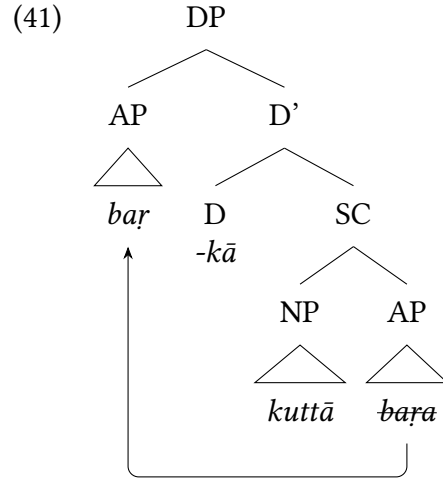
- (37) ek ṭho **bartamān-^{*}k-ā** māṣṭar
 one CLF.INDF **current-^{*}DET-M** teacher
 ‘a/one current teacher’

- (38) # ek ṭho **jaharil-k-ā**
 one CLF.INDF **poisonous-DET-M**
gehūa sāp
wheat snake
 ‘a/one poisonous cobra’ (lit. wheat snake)

- (39) ek ṭho **jaharil-k-ā** **bhēñ**
 one CLF.INDF **poisonous-DET-M** frog
 ‘a/one poisonous frog’

Indefinite DS in Magahi also occurs with participial RRCs (40). So, the RRC analysis extends to Magahi indefinite DS as well, assuming that *-kā* is underspecified for definiteness. The structure for *baṛkā kuttā* ‘big dog’ is given in (41).

- (40) du ṭho **taigor ke dwāra**
 two CLF.INDF **Tagore GEN by**
likh-al-k-ā kitāb
write-PTCP-DET-M book
 ‘two books written by Tagore’



5 Multiple Classifier Constructions

As we have seen, adjectives in Magahi (in)definite DS can have both *-kā* and a classifier.

- (42) e-go **baṛ-k-ā-go** kuttā
 one-CLF big-**DET-M-CLF.INDF** dog
 ‘a/one big dog’

- (43) **baṛ-k-a-wā** kut-wā
 big-**DET-M-CLF.DEF** dog-**CLF.DEF**
 ‘the big dog’

Indefinite MCCs in Magahi have two different options for the determiner: *-kā* or *-e*. The choice seems to depend on the adjective, and some are compatible with both options. *-wā/-go* cannot attach to an adjective without *-kā/-e*.

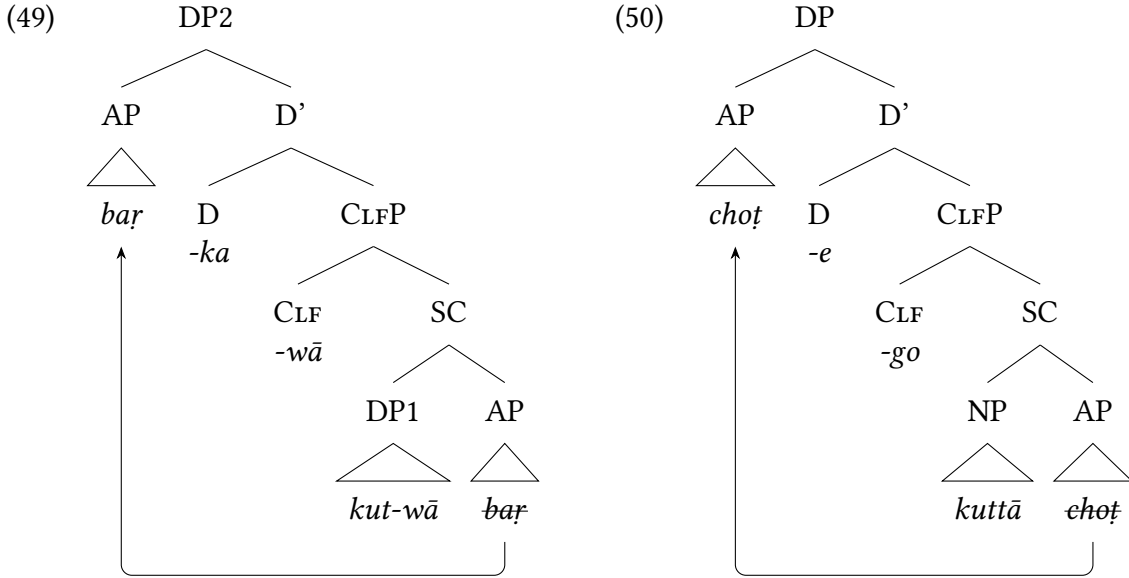
- (44) **baṛ-{k-ā/^{*}e}-go** kuttā
 big-**DET-M/^{*}DET.INDF-CLF.INDF** dog
 ‘a big dog’

- (45) *choṭ*-{*k-ā/e*}-*go*
 small-DET-M/DET.INDF-CLF.INDF
kuttā
 dog
 ‘a small dog’
- (46) *moṭ*-{*k-ā/e*}-*go* *kuttā*
 fat-DET-M/DET.INDF-CLF.INDF dog
 ‘a fat dog’

Magahi MCCs also have the properties of Greek-type DS, including recursivity.

- (47) *baṛ-k-a-wā* *kar-k-a-wā* *kut-wā*
 big-DET-M-CLF.DEF black-DET-M-CLF.DEF dog-CLF.DEF
 ‘the big black dog’
- (48) *e-go* *choṭ-e-go* *moṭ-e-go* *kuttā*
 one-CLF.INDF small-DET.INDF-CLF.INDF fat-DET.INDF-CLF.INDF dog
 ‘a/one small fat dog’

Structures for ‘the big dog’ (49) and ‘a small dog’ (50) are given below.



These structures are the same as before, with the addition of a classifier projection. The motivation for the RRC proposal drew on the connection between determiners and relative clauses established by Kayne (1994). So, the structures in (49) and (50) predict a relationship between classifiers and relative clauses in other languages. This is borne out in Cantonese, which has relative clauses introduced by classifiers (Matthews & Yip 2013), and Nuosu Yi, which has relative clauses introduced by a classifier and determiner together (Jiang & Hu 2016).

6 Why don't definite and indefinite always co-occur?

A uniform proposal for definite and indefinite DS raises the question of why the Magahi pattern seems to be cross-linguistically rare. This section looks at the languages proposed to have Greek-type DS: Greek, Kipsigis (Kouneli 2019, 2021), Maltese (Winchester 2019), Thai (Clausen 2022), and Rukiga (Asiimwe, Kouneli & van der Wal 2023). Besides Rukiga, these languages all lack indefinite DS, which I argue is because they lack true indefinite articles.

It has been noted that Greek seemingly lacks indefinite DS. The indefinite “article” *ena* does not spread like the definite one (51). However, indefinite DPs allow for the same word order flexibility seen in definite DPs with DS. Alexiadou (2014) argues that this is the result of the spreading of a null indefinite article and gives reasons to think that *ena* is always just the numeral ‘one’, rather than a true indefinite article.

(51) Greek (Alexiadou & Wilder 1998: 325)

* **ena** megalo **ena** kokkino **ena** vivlio
 a big a red a book
 Intended: ‘a big red book’

In Kipsigis (52), spreading occurs with demonstratives. So, it is unsurprising that there is no indefinite counterpart.

(52) Kipsigis (Kouneli 2021: 10)

págàa-níin tùuy nín òo
 cat-DEM.DIST black DEM.DIST big
 ‘that big black cat’

(53) Thai (Hundius & Kölver 1983: 169)

nók tua sǐi-k^hǎw tua jàj
 bird CLF green CLF big
 ‘the big green bird’

In Thai, MCCs are only definite (53).³ Thai uses classifiers rather than determiners, but the same type of reasoning still applies here. Jenks (2011) analyzes the definite MCCs with a null definite determiner. I assume there is no indefinite counterpart.

Maltese has a robust definite DS pattern (54), but like Greek lacks an indefinite article and uses the numeral ‘one’ (Fabri 2001).

(54) Maltese (Winchester 2019: 48)

il-ktieb l-iswed il-kbir
 DET-book.M.SG DET-black.M.SG DET-big.M.SG
 ‘the big black book’

Finally, in Rukiga, like in Magahi, the spreading pattern is generally described as definite (55). Spreading in Rukiga occurs with the augment, which Asiimwe, Kouneli & van der Wal (2023) argue to be a determiner. However, like *-kā* the augment does not require a definite interpretation and also allows for spreading in indefinite noun phrases (56).

³Jenks (2011) reports they can be specific indefinites. However, this is only with the addition of the indefinite quantifier *baan* ‘some’. It could be the case that these are partitives which still include a definite DP, but I will leave this issue open for now.

- (55) Rukiga (Asiimwe, Kouneli & van der Wal 2023: 1307)
 e-bi-muri é-bi-rungi é-bi-hángo é-bi-ngi
 AUG-8-flower AUG-8-beautiful AUG-8-big AUG-8-many
 ‘many (of the) big beautiful flowers’
- (56) Rukiga (Asiimwe, Kouneli & van der Wal 2023: 1292)
 o-mu-shááj’ ó-mu-rungí
 AUG-1-man AUG-1-good
 ‘a good man’

So, the apparent lack of co-occurrence between definite and indefinite DS is due to the lack of indefinite articles in the relevant languages.

7 Revisiting Plank (2003)’s Universal

Because Thai and Magahi both allow bare noun arguments, they serve as counterexamples to a universal about spreading patterns proposed by Plank (2003: 337).

- (57) No language will practise double articulation of any kind unless it also articulates its NPs singly, but not vice-versa.

Unmodified definite nouns in Thai occur bare (58). However, with modifiers classifiers can be licensed in the noun phrase (59), and we have seen that this pattern is recursive (3).

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>(58) Thai (Jenks 2011: 64)
 thúrian
 durian
 ‘the durian’</p> | <p>(59) Thai (Jenks 2018: 7)
 thúrian lúuk mǎn-mǎn
 durian CLF stinky-RED
 ‘the smelly durian’</p> |
|--|--|

Magahi (in)definite nouns can also occur bare, but modifiers in such noun phrases can still be marked.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>(60) okar choṭ-k-ā betā
 3NH.GEN small-DET-M son
 ‘his younger son’</p> | <p>(61) baṛ-k-ā-go kuttā
 big-DET-M-CLF.INDF dog
 ‘a big dog’</p> |
|--|---|

If “spreading” really just involves licensing RRCs, then this behavior should be expected for languages that allow bare noun arguments.

8 Conclusion and outlook

In this paper, I have defended the view that Greek-type DS involves RRCs, which can explain the recursivity, predicativity, and restrictivity associated with such patterns. Additionally, primarily based on Magahi data, I have argued that Greek-type DS is not restricted to definite DS, but there are also cases of Greek-type indefinite DS and MCCs. Questions for future work

include determining what other heads in the noun phrase could potentially participate in spreading and investigating the possibilities of “mixed” spreading involving both definite and indefinite determiners.

Abbreviations

3 = third person, AUG = augment, AUX = auxiliary, CLF = classifier, COP = copula, DEF = definite, DEM = demonstrative, DET = determiner, DIST = distal, DS = determiner spreading, EIA = Eastern Indo-Aryan, F = feminine, GEN = genitive, INDF = indefinite, M = masculine, MCC = multiple classifier construction, NH = non-honorific, PST = past, PTCP = participle, RED = reduplication, RRC = reduced relative clause, SG = singular.

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