

(In)Definiteness Spreading and Multiple Classifier Constructions

Aidan Sharma, Rutgers University

Overview. This paper presents data from Magahi, an Eastern Indo-Aryan (EIA) language spoken in Bihar, India, to contribute to the study of determiner spreading (DS). This paper argues that: (i.) Greek-type DS is derived from a reduced relative clause (RRC) structure; (ii.) indefinite and definite DS can have the same syntactic structure; (iii.) DS is part of a wider phenomenon that involves “spreading” of functional heads high in the noun phrase. Uncited data come from elicitations done by the author with 6 Magahi speakers.

Background. DS, or the occurrence of ‘extra’ D(eterminers) with modifiers, is well studied in Greek (1; Alexiadou & Wilder 1998: 303), and has Properties A-C (Androusoyopoulou 1995; Alexiadou & Wilder 1998; Kolliakou 2004; Tsakali 2008; Lekakou & Szendrői 2012; Alexiadou 2014: a.o.).

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| (1) <i>to kokino to megalo to vivlio</i>
the big the red the book
‘the big red book’ | A. Recursivity (there is a D for each adjective)
B. A restrictive interpretation
C. Only possible with predicative adjectives |
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[Greek]

DS does not have Properties A-C in all languages e.g., Hebrew DS (Shlonsky 2004) lacks properties B and C and Swedish DS (Alexiadou 2014) lacks all 3 properties. I follow Kouneli (2021) in referring to DS with properties A-C as Greek-type DS. The syntax of Greek DS is heavily debated, but investigations into Greek-type DS in other languages such as Kipsigis (Kouneli 2019), Maltese (Winchester 2019), and Rukiga (Asimwe et al. 2023) all favor a RRC analysis (Alexiadou & Wilder 1998; Alexiadou 2014). These papers focus on definite DS, and there is no discussion of its relation to two similar phenomena: indefinite DS and multiple classifier constructions (MCCs). Indefinite DS and MCCs in adjectival modification are less common cross-linguistically, but attested in northern Scandinavian (2; Delsing 1993: 143) and Thai (3; Jenks 2006: 5) respectively.

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| (2) <i>en stor en ful en kar</i>
a big a ugly a man
‘a big ugly man’ | [Northern Swedish] | (3) <i>maa tua sii.dam tua yay</i>
dog CLF black CLF big
‘the big black dog’ | [Thai] |
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Though superficially parallel, Alexiadou (2006, 2014) has argued that indefinite and definite DS are different syntactically, with the ‘extra’ Ds in indefinite DS spelling out a linker in a predicative small clause (cf. Den Dikken 2006), while the ‘extra’ Ds in definite DS serve to introduce RRCs in the spirit of Kayne (1994). Anderssen et al. (2019) support this, proposing that indefinite DS in Senja Norwegian has a predicative small clause structure despite having Properties A-C. Thai MCCs have properties A-C (Jenks 2006; Clausen 2022), but prominent analyses do not feature a direct relationship to DS (Piriyawiboon 2009; Jenks 2011, 2018).

Magahi (In)Definites. Magahi is a numeral classifier language (4; 5) and uses the same classifier for all nouns (Alok 2012). Magahi also has a definite suffix *-waa* (allomorphs: *-(i)yaa/-aa/maa*; Alok 2022) (6; 7).

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| (4) <i>e-go kutta</i>
one-CLF dog
‘a/one dog’ | (5) <i>pāāc-go kitaab</i>
five-CLF book
‘five books’ | (6) <i>kutt-waa</i>
dog-CLF.DEF
‘the dog’ | (7) <i>kitab-aa</i>
book-CLF.DEF
‘the book’ |
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Syntactically, *-waa* has been argued to be the definite allomorph of the classifier (Sharma 2025; Kumar 2020) for two reasons: its position matches classifiers in definites in other EIA languages and there is an alternation between *-go* and *-waa* after adjectives in (in)definites (9; 15). The NP-*waa* word order is derived from *-waa* undergoing CLF to D head movement and the NP raising to SpecDP to check a [+DEF] feature (Sharma 2025).

Magahi DS. There is a suffix *-kaa* (fem. allomorph: *-kii*) that follows adjectives modifying definite nouns in Magahi (Kumar 2020; Alok 2012). Also, *-kaa* can optionally be followed by *-waa*.

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| (8) <i>choṭ-kii-(yaa) bilai-yaa</i>
small-D-CLF.DEF cat-CLF.DEF
‘the small cat’ | (9) <i>bara-kaa-(waa) kar-kaa-(waa) kutt-waa</i>
big-D-CLF.DEF black-D-CLF.DEF dog-CLF.DEF
‘the big black dog’ |
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Traditionally, *-kaa* is described as a definiteness agreement marker in Magahi and related languages (Sinha 1966; Verma 2003; Alok 2012). This predicts it should be compatible with all adjectives. Yet, adjectives that cannot occur predicatively (10) cannot take the suffix *-kaa* (11) at all (Property C).

(10) * *maṣṭar-waa barthamaan hai*
 teacher-DEF current is

Intended: ‘The teacher is current.’

(11) *barthamaan-*kaa maṣṭar-waa*
 current-*D teacher-DEF

‘the current teacher’

Additionally, adjectives with *-kaa* must be interpreted restrictively (Property B). For example, *bara-kaa kutt-waa* ‘the big dog’ is felicitous only in a situation with more than one dog. *-kaa* also has Property A (cf. 9). *-kaa* is usually assumed to be definite, but also occurs in indefinites (15), where it alternates with another suffix *-e* (12). *-e* is not the numeral *one* (cf. 4) since it also occurs in higher numeral expressions. Indefinites maintain Properties A (12), B (13), and C (14; *poisonous* here is non-restrictive since all cobras are poisonous).

(12) *choṭ-e-(go) moṭ-e-(go) kutta*
 small-INDEF-CLF fat-INDEF-CLF dog
 ‘a small fat dog’

(13) *e-go barthamaan-*kaa-*go maṣṭar*
 one-CLF current-*D-*CLF teacher
 ‘a current teacher’

(14) *e-go jaharila-#kaa-#go gehūūa sāāp*
 one-CLF poisonous-#D-#CLF wheat snake
 ‘a/one poisonous cobra (lit: wheat snake)’

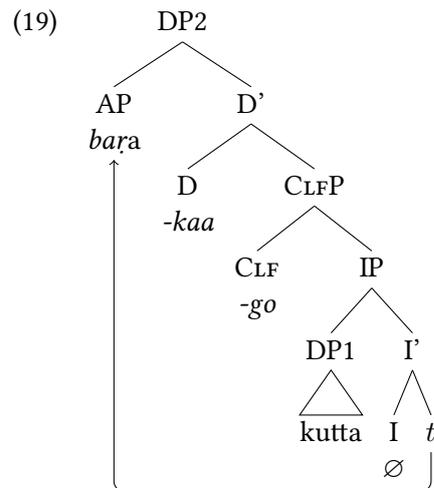
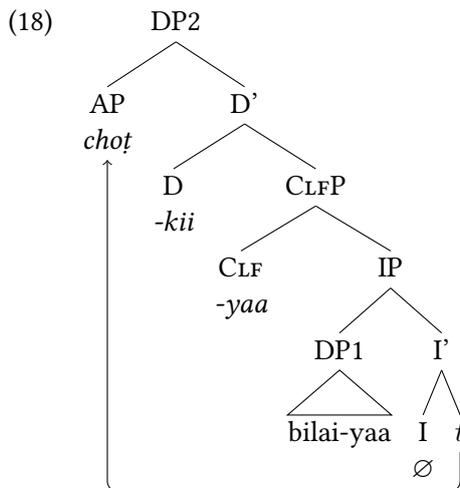
(15) *bara-kaa-(go) kutta*
 big-D-CLF dog
 ‘a big dog’

Given the similarities, I take *-kaa* to be a [\pm DEF] D and *-e* a [-DEF] D involved in Greek-type DS in Magahi. Ds are attested in classifier languages (Jiang 2020; Su 2025), and *-kaa/-e* license nominal ellipsis and function referentially when definite, supporting their status as Ds. Additionally, these Magahi structures also occur as MCCs and the Mirror Principle indicates *-kaa/-e* are higher in the nominal spine than the classifier. Finally, *-kaa* occurs in participial RCs (16), showing direct support for the RRC analysis of DS in a way that is not borne out in Greek itself. Importantly, this connection to RRCs is also true of indefinites (17).

(16) *abhi bol rah-al-kaa larak-waa*
 now talk AUX-PTCP-D boy-CLF.DEF
 ‘the boy who was talking just now’

(17) *taigor ke dwara likh-al-kaa kitaab*
 Tagore GEN by write-PTCP-D book
 ‘a book written by Tagore’

Uniform DS. The proposed analysis follows Alexiadou & Wilder (1998); Alexiadou (2014) in taking (Greek-type) DS to involve a D that introduces a RRC. For Magahi, it must be possible that either a D or a CLF can introduce a RRC. This is not a unique claim for Magahi, as Jiang & Hu (2016) and Luo (2004) report the same possibilities for Nuosu Yi and Zhuang RCs, respectively. In both the definite (18) and indefinite (19) structures, the APs begin as predicates in a RRC, deriving Property C, and raise to SpecDP. Following Alexiadou (2014); Asimwe et al. (2023), I assume this movement is related to information structure as SpecDP is an A’ position in Magahi. I also propose D is spelled-out as *-kaa/-e* with an AP in SpecDP and null otherwise, explaining why nouns are not suffixed with *-kaa/-e*. Property A comes from the fact the subject DP of the RRC could also be a DS structure. I take property B to follow from these RRCs being a form of indirect modification (Cinque 2010). The internal structures of the subject DPs are omitted here for simplicity.



This analysis differs from that of Alexiadou & Wilder (1998); Alexiadou (2014) in the landing site of the AP (SpecDP here vs. SpecIP for them). This difference allows for an explanation of a difference between Greek and Magahi DS. Greek DS allows for an otherwise unavailable DP word order where the noun and its

determiner precede all adjectives (e.g., *the dog the big*), while Magahi does not. Alexiadou & Wilder model this as the smallest DP containing the noun moving to Spec of the largest DP introducing a RRC. Since this position is the landing site of the AP in Magahi, assuming multiple Specs are disallowed, it explains the lack of reordering w.r.t. the noun. Finally, beyond Ds and CLFs, this paper predicts that any functional head which can introduce a RC should exist in a “spreading” construction with Properties A-C in some language.

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