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► **To cite this version:**

Diego Pescarini. Nominal syntax (and morphology) at the Ligurian/Occitan border. 53rd SLE Meeting, WS 8: Contact and the architecture of language faculty, Aug 2020, On line, Romania. hal-03094935

**HAL Id: hal-03094935**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03094935>**

Submitted on 4 Jan 2021

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# Nominal syntax (and morphology) at the Ligurian/Occitan border

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## 1. Introduction

The talk focuses primarily on the syntax of the noun phrase in Nissart (Niçart/Niçois), the Occitan dialect spoken in the city of Nice (southern France). My goal is to compare Nissart with nearby linguistic systems that are attested in the contact area stretching from the River Var (immediately east of Nice) and the Italian town of Taggia, see Fig. 1. The dialects spoken in this area belong to two Romance subgroups: southern Occitan (Sauzet and Oliviéri 2016) and *Intemelian* Ligurian (Forner 1986).

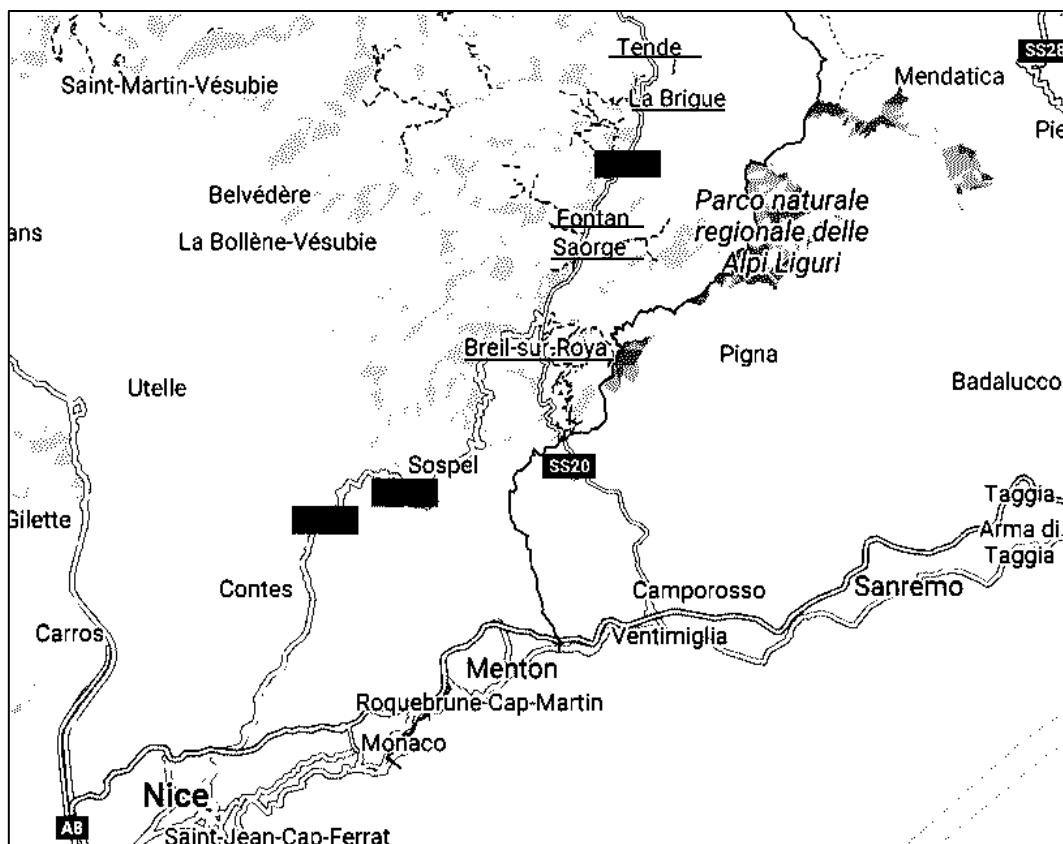


Fig. 1 – Contact area between southern Occitan and (Intemelian) Ligurian.

Ligurian dialects spoken in France are underlined. Source: Googlemaps.

Phonological, morphological, lexical and syntactic isoglosses separate southern Occitan and Ligurian dialects (Dalbera 1994). At the syntactic level, southern Occitan differs from Ligurian under four main respects (Forner 1986, 163; Oliviéri 2008):

	Southern Occitan	Intemelian Ligurian	Other Lig. dialects
Subject clitics	-	+	+
Enclisis to infinitives	-	+	+
Oblique pronouns	-	+	+
Dat > Acc clitics	-	-	+

Table 1 – Syntactic differences between Occitan and Ligurian dialects

Historically, the area has been subject to influence from Genoese, until the 19<sup>th</sup> century the most prestigious local language. Conservative traits are therefore better preserved in the mountain areas or in the rustic registers of the coastal vernaculars. Linguistic boundaries are more nuanced along the coast, especially in the “transitional” area around Menton<sup>1</sup>.

In terms of roofing languages, the whole area has witnessed the influence of Italian until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>2</sup>. Until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Italian was spoken in the Nice area (but recall that, in the same period, French was spoken and written by the elites of the Kingdom of Piedmont. Nowadays the linguistic boundary between Italian and French coincides with the administrative border. The linguistic boundary between Occitan and Italo-Romance, conversely, runs in the French territory (Dalbera 2003): Ligurian dialects are still spoken in the French towns of Saorge, Breil-sur-Roya, Fontan, Brigue, Tende (see Fig. 1). No Occitan dialect is spoken in Liguria, although few municipalities at the border pretend their dialect is Occitan. From a sociolinguistic standpoint, Italian speakers tend to be diglossic (Italian/dialect), whereas French speakers tend to be monolingual. Occitan varieties and the Ligurian dialects in the French territory are in fact highly endangered.

Most studies have examined this contact/transition area with the intent of providing a sound classification (Forner 1986; 1989; Dalbera 1994; 2003). Syntax has been examined cursorily and only with respect to well-known distinctive characteristics (see Table 1). This study intends

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<sup>1</sup> Dialects spoken in Menton, Roquebrune, Castillon, Castelar, Sainte-Agnès, Gorbio are difficult to classify, but see (Oliviéri 2008).

<sup>2</sup> In 1860, the counties of Nice and Savoy were given to France by Sardinia-Piedmont in return for Napoleon III's support in the war against Austria to annex Lombardy.

to provide a microcomparative analysis of selected varieties, focusing on the syntax of the noun phrase. The nominal phrase has proved to be a reliable proxy for linguistic classification: the clusters of languages generated by a principled analysis of the noun phrase correspond to the linguistic families and groups reconstructed by means of non-syntactic comparative evidence (Longobardi and Guardiano 2009; Guardiano 2016). Therefore, it is worth examining the facets of nominal syntax in an area of contact between different linguistic systems (both at the level of dialects and roofing languages).

The description of Nissart is based on a corpus of 20th century texts (as previously said, most dialects in the French territory are almost extinct) and novel data obtained from semi-speakers. Data are stored in the Nice-based database Thesoc<sup>3</sup>. For cross-linguistic comparison with Occitan and Italo-Romance systems, the study relies on data from linguistic atlases such as ALF<sup>4</sup>, AIS<sup>5</sup>, ASIt<sup>6</sup> and the material published in Manzini and Savoia 2005.

The talk is organised as follows: §2 overviews the morphology of Nissart nominal elements; §3 and §4 deals with the syntax of articles and possessives; §5 deals with kinship terms. After a summary of the relevant data (§6), §7 focuses on the analysis of possessives.

## 2. Morphology of Nissart

Before addressing syntactic data, I report the inventories of definite articles, possessives and demonstrative forms that are attested in Nissart (Gasiglia 1984).

Definite articles have a four-ways inflection, although in the spoken language the form *li* is seldom used with both masculine and feminine plural nouns.

	SG	PL
M	l(ou) [lu]	lu [ly] > %li
F	l(a)	li

Table 2 - Paradigm of Nissart definite articles

<sup>3</sup> <http://thesaurus.unice.fr/>

<sup>4</sup> ALF maps have been downloaded from the website of the SYMILA project: <http://symila.univ-tlse2.fr/>

<sup>5</sup> I consulted the on-line version of the atlas, *Navigais* (Tisato 2010): <https://www3.pd.istc.cnr.it/navigais-web/>. AIS transcriptions have been downloaded from the website of the project *AIS, reloaded*: <https://www.ais-reloaded.uzh.ch/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://asit.maldura.unipd.it/>

Nissart has three series of demonstratives: proximal (1<sup>st</sup> person), medial (2<sup>nd</sup> person) and distal (3<sup>rd</sup> person). Each form can be used either as a determiner or as a pronoun. Demonstratives have the same pattern of agreement as articles:

	MSG	MPL	FSG	FPL
1	(aic)estou	(aic)estu	(aic)esta	(aic)esti
2	aquestou	aquestu	aquesta	aquesti
3	aquèu/-el	aquelu	aquela	aqueli

Table 3 – Paradigm of demonstratives

Nissart possessives fall into three types: postnominal agreeing possessives; prenominal non-agreeing possessives and clitic possessives, see (1). Clitic possessives occur with singular kinship nouns and are in complementary distribution with determiners. Unlike articles and demonstratives, possessives exhibit a pattern of agreement in which masculine singular and plural endings are syncretic, see Table 4.

- (1) a. la cadièra **mieua** (Niss.)  
       ‘my seat’  
 b. la **mieu(\*a)** cadièra  
       ‘my seat’  
 c. **ma** tanta  
       my aunt

Possessor	Agreement	Strong	Weak	Clitic
1	M ~ F.SG/PL	miéu-a/-i	miéu	moun ~ ma
2	M ~ F.SG/PL	tiéu-a/-i	tiéu	toun ~ ta
3/6	M ~ F.SG/PL	siéu-a/-i	siéu	soun ~ sa
4	M ~ F.SG/PL	nouèstr-e/a/í	nouèstr-e/a/í	nouèstr-e/a
5	M ~ F.SG/PL	vouèstr-e/a/í	vouèstr-e/a/í	vouèstr-e/a

Table 4 – Paradigm of Nissart possessives

Adjectives occur either prenominally or postnominally, with the same orders and interpretations we find in other Romance languages such as French and Italian. No

morphological difference distinguishes prenominal from postnominal adjectives, although asymmetries of this kind are attested in other Occitan dialects (Stark and Pomino 2009 and references therein). Regular adjectives of the first class display the same agreement system as postnominal possessives, in which masculine singular and plural forms have the same ending -*e*:

	SG	PL
M	brave	brave
F	brava	bravi

Table 5 – Paradigm of adjectives of the first class, e.g. *brave* ‘good’

Three adjectives differ from the others in having different forms for the masculine singular and plural. These endings, however, do not correspond to those of determiners:

- (2) a. bèu/l, bei, bella, belli (Niss.)  
‘nice.MSG, ~MPL, ~FSG, ~FPL’  
b. bouòn, bouòi, bouòna, bouòni  
‘good.MSG, ~MPL, ~FSG, ~FPL’  
c. pichoun, picoui, pichouna, pichouni  
‘little.MSG, ~MPL, ~FSG, ~FPL’

Nouns normally do not display number inflection: singular and plural nouns display the same morphology, both in the masculine and in the feminine. The majority of feminine nouns, both singular and plural, end in *-a*. As a result, see (3), number is clearly marked on determiners and on the irregular adjectives in (2), on feminine adjectives (including postverbal possessives), whereas nouns tend to be syncretic (Sauzet 2012):

- (3) a. **la bella filha.** (Niss.)  
‘the nice girl.’  
b. **li belli filha.**  
‘the nice girls.’

The agreement mismatch between determiners, feminine adjectives, and nouns yields an asymmetry in the marking of number that recalls patterns of so-called *lazy concord/agreement*

(Haiman and Benincà 1992; Rasom 2008; Stark and Pomino 2009; Bonet 2013). In Nissart, however, the asymmetry takes place regardless of the ordering and interpretation of nominal constituents. Only possessives are involved in a synchronically active alternation between agreeing and non-agreeing forms (more on this in §3).

The following table reports the agreement endings of nouns (deriving from the Lat. 1<sup>st</sup> declension), adjectives (of the first group), and other nominal modifiers. Cases of syncretism are marked in grey:

	ART	DEM	POSS	ADJ <sub>1</sub>	N <sub>1</sub>
MSG	u	u	u	e	-
MPL	y <sup>7</sup>	y <sup>7</sup>	u	e	-
FSG	a	a	a	a	a
FPL	i	i	i	i	a

Table 6 – Inflectional endings

### 3. Article-less NPs

Mass singular and indefinite plurals are always introduced by *de* (without article):

- (4) a. Ai d'amics. (Niss.; cf. Fr. J'ai des amis)  
 'I have friends.'
- b. Vuòli de pan. (cf. Fr. Je veux du pain)  
 'I want (some) bread'
- c. Vuòli pas de pan.  
 'I don't want bread.'
- d. (Vautre) ligès jamai de libre.  
 'You never read books.'

Partitive articles, i.e. determiners formed by the preposition *de* plus the definite article (e.g. *de + lou* → *dou*), are rarely attested, but, according to Gasiglia 1984, they are restricted to cases of nominal ellipsis of the kind illustrated in (5):

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<sup>7</sup> Sometimes *-i* in the spoken language.

- (5) a. Vouòli **de/\*dou** vin. (Niss)  
 ‘I want (some) wine.’  
 b. Vouòli **de/\*dou** vin rouge.  
 ‘I want (some) red wine.’  
 c. Vouòli **\*de/dou** rouge  
 ‘I want (some) red wine.’

Bare mass singular and indefinite plurals, even if introduced by *de*, are marginal in subject position, where indefinite nouns are usually introduced by a dummy definite article:<sup>8</sup>

- (6) a. l’ aiga es venguda de la fouònt. (Niss.)  
 the water is come from the fountain  
 b. ??d’ aiga es venguda de la fouònt  
 of water is come from the fountain  
 c. \*de l’ aiga es venguda de la fouònt  
 of the water is come from the fountain

In this respect, noun phrases introduced by *de* are subject to the same restriction as bare nouns in a language such as Italian (Longobardi 1994).

Pluralia tantum such as *li bràia* (‘trousers’), *li aisamenta* (‘dishes’) are introduced by the indefinite article *uni*, e.g. *uni bràia* ‘a pair of arms’ (Gasiglia 1984: 118), which is the plural of the indefinite pronoun *un* ‘a’ that introduces NPs headed by. According to Ledgeway 2016: 765, similar forms are attested in other Romance area, see (7), and are “best considered indefinite quantifiers rather than plural articles since - unlike the corresponding singular articles - they generally prove optional.”

- (7) a. Había **unas** caxes enriba la mesa. (Ast.)

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<sup>8</sup> Proverbs in fact allow mass nouns to occur in non-lexically selected positions (the same holds true for other Romance languages such as French or Italian):

- (i) a. pan coupat noun a mestre. (Niss.)  
 b. Pain coupé n'a point de maître. (Fr.)  
 c. buon sangue non mente. (It.)



‘there.were some boxes on the table’

b. Fau **unas** còcas. (Lgd.)

‘I.make some cakes’

According to the ALF data, singular mass nouns are introduced by *de* (without article) in the other southern Occitan dialects, including those spoken in Plan-du-Var (898), which is located at the western border of the area we are examining, and Le Cannet (897). Conversely, the Ligurian dialect of Fontan (990), and the “transitional” dialect of Menton (899) differ from southern Occitan varieties in requiring the definite article after *de*:



Fig 2 – ALF 57: (*gagner*) *de l'argent* ; (... *et que nous lui rendions*) *son argent*

Fontan and Menton exhibit the same system as Ligurian and Piedmontese dialects that are spoken at the boundary with France, which, according to the data reported in the AIS, always require mass nouns to be introduced by *de* plus the definite article (for a systematic overview of the AIS data, see Cardinaletti and Giusti 2018). In negative clauses, however, (western) ligurian dialects require article-less phrases introduced by *de*, as in French (Garzonio and Poletto 2018). The comparison between Nissart/southern Occitan dialects and Ligurian with respect to the marking of plural indefinite and singular mass nouns is summarized as follows:

	Nissart	Transitional varieties	Ligurian
POSITIVE	<i>de</i>	<i>de + art</i>	<i>de + art</i>
NEGATIVE	<i>de</i>	NA	<i>de</i>

Tab. 2 - marking of plural indefinite and singular mass nouns

#### 4. Possessives

In Nissart, possessives co-occur with definite and indefinite articles (save for possessives introducing kinship nouns, cf. §4):

(8) a. **alu nouastre** primou pas en la vida. (Niss.)

‘to.our first step in life.’

b. **Lou miéu** libre.

‘my book.’

c. **li nouastri** cansoun.

‘our songs.’

(9) **Un siéu** libre. (Niss.)

‘A book of his/hers/theirs.’

According to the ALF data in Fig. 2, the co-occurrence of articles and possessives sets apart the dialects of the Alpes Maritimes from the other Occitan dialects, where articles and possessives do not co-occur. Conversely, possessives and articles always co-occur in the nearby western Ligurian dialects.

Postnominal possessives are necessarily focalised (Cardinaletti 1998) and, unlike prenominal possessives, they can be coordinated and modified. Postnominal possessives are identical to predicative possessives and possessive pronouns, which are always preceded by the definite article, see (10)a’ (Gasiglia 1984: 164):

(10) a. Aqueu libre es **miéu** / a’.aqueu libre es **lou miéu** (Niss.)

That book is my                      That book is the mine

‘That book is mine’

- b. Li maious soun **miéui**  
 The sweaters are my.pl  
 ‘The sweaters are mine’
- c. La fauta es pas **nouòstra**.  
 The mistake is not our.fsg  
 ‘The mistake is not ours.’

Monosyllabic prenominal possessives (*miéu*, *tiéu*, *siéu*) do not agree in gender and number, whereas first and second person plural possessives always agree:

- (11) a. la **mieu**(\*a) cadièra vs a'. la **nouòstr**\*(a) cadièra (Niss.)  
 ‘my chair’ ‘our chair’
- b. li **mieu**(\*i) cadièra vs b'. li **nouòstr**\*(i) cadièra  
 ‘my chairs’ ‘our chairs’

In this respect, Nissart differs from western Ligurian dialects, which have inflected prenominal possessives (with all types of nouns, kinship or not):

- (12) a. **u to-u** amigo. (Vallecrosia; ASIIt)  
 ‘your friend’
- b. **i to-i** fioi  
 ‘your sons’

Not all Ligurian varieties, however, display agreeing possessives. In this respect, microvariation is really pervasive.

To summarise, Nissart displays two series of possessives: clitic possessives with kinship nouns and ‘plain’ possessives, which can co-occur with the definite article and are placed prenominally, postnominally, and in predicative position. Prenominal monosyllabic possessives do not agree.

The lack of agreement on prenominal possessives results from the adjectival nature of Nissart possessives. In fact, asymmetric/‘lazy’ agreement, depending on the prenominal vs postnominal placement of adjectives, is quite frequent in Romance and is attested in some varieties of Occitan (cf. Pomino and Starke 2008 and references therein), but – crucially – not in Nissart.

## 5. Possessives with kinship terms

Clitic possessives, which only occur with kinship nouns, are in complementary distribution with definite articles.

- (13) a. **moun** paire. (Niss.)  
      ‘my dad’  
      b. **vouòstra** souòrre  
          ‘your sister’  
      c. **sa** mougliè  
          ‘his wife’

Clitic possessives are restricted to singular, non-modified nouns. Plural and modified kinship nouns are introduced by articles and non-clitic possessives (Gasiglia 1984: 168):<sup>9</sup>

- (14) a. (\*lou) toun ounce / lu tiéu ounce (Niss.)  
      ‘your uncle / your uncles’  
      b. (\*la) vouòstra tanta / li vouòstri tanta  
          ‘your aunt / your aunts’  
      c. (\*lou) soun fraire / lu siéu fraire  
          ‘his/her brother / his/her brothers.’

- (15) a. lou miéu vielh paigran. (Niss.)  
      ‘my old grandfather’  
      b. la miéu paura souòrre  
          ‘my poor sister’

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<sup>9</sup> According to Philippe Del Giudice (p.c.), the article is not obligatory with modified kinship nouns.

Many Romance languages, including western Ligurian dialects, exhibit similar restriction, as shown in (16) with data from the dialect of Pigna (Manzini and Savoia 2005, III: 660ff; Giusti 2016: 544):<sup>10</sup>

- (16) a. *mɛi/ tɛi/ sɛi* 'pɔ (Pigna)  
           ‘my/your/his/her dad’  
       b. *mia/ ta/ sa* 'mɔ  
           ‘my/your/his/her mum’  
       c. *mɛi/ tɛi/ sɛi* 'fiʎu                      c'.i *mɛi/ tɛi/ sɛi* fiʎei  
           ‘my/your/his/her son’                      ‘my/your/his/her sons’  
       d. *mia/ta/sa* 'fiʎa                      d'.e *mie/tue/sue* 'fiʎe  
           ‘my/your/his/her daughter’                      ‘my/your/his/her daughters’

Gender agreement gives rise to further variation. Ligurian dialects normally display syncretic clitic possessives, which are not inflected for number and gender. In this respect, the dialect of Vallecrosia, which is very close to the border, stands out because, like Nissart, it has clitic possessives that are inflected for gender:

- (17) **to** barba / **to** frai / **ta** so (Vallecrosia)  
       ‘your uncle / your brother / your sister’

## 6. (Interim) conclusion

The following table compares the data discussed so far regarding the syntax of articles and possessives:

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<sup>10</sup> The data reported in the AIS show that the western Ligurian dialect of Airole systematically differs from the nearby datapoint (Borgomaro) as the former tends to lack articles with both singular and plural kinship terms. The AIS data suggest that, a century ago, cross-linguistic variation was more kaleidoscopic than in modern days, probably because of the influence of Italian, in which plural kinship nouns must always occur with the article.

	Southern Occitan			Western Ligurian	
	Others	Nissart	Transitional	Intemelian	Others
<b>a. Article-less indefinite plural and mass Ns</b>					
bare N (like It.)	-	-	-	-	NA
<i>de</i> + N in positive clauses	+	+	-	-	-
<i>de</i> + N in negative cl.	+	+	+	+	+
<b>b. Possessives (no kinship Ns)</b>					
Article + possessives	-	+	+	+	+
Postnominal possessives	NA	+	+	+	+
Agreeing pre-N poss.	NA	-	NA	+	-
<b>c. Possessives with kinship Ns</b>					
Article with pl. Ns	NA	+	NA	+	+
Same as poss. in (b)	NA	-	NA	+	+
Agreeing clitic poss.	+	+	+	+/-	-

Tab. 12 – Comparison between linguistic areas

## 7. Appendix: a note on “clitic” possessives

To account for variation in possessive systems, Cardinaletti 1998; Cardinaletti & Giusti 2019 propose a three-way distinction based on (Cardinaletti and Starke 1999) The typology is here illustrated with data from Paduan (a northern Italian dialect):

- strong possessives do not move from their base-generation position and, being fully-fledged XPs, they can be coordinated, focalised, modified, etc.; in languages with N movement, they occur postnominally as in (18)a;
- weak possessives move to a prenominal position, see (18)b;
- clitic possessives move to D; they are therefore in complementary distribution with articles and may allow doubling, see (18)c; in many Romance languages, clitic possessives are restricted to kinship nouns.

- (18) a. el libro **suo**. (Pad.)                      Strong  
the book his/her
- b. el **so** libro                                      Weak  
the his/her book



Doubling, however, is not a necessary condition as we know that clitic doubling, in general, is subject to language-specific restrictions. The fact that Nissart, unlike a northern Italian dialect such as Paduan, does not allow doubling is not *per se* evidence against Cardinaletti's classification:

(22) \***soun** paire de Jouan (Niss.)  
 his father of J.  
 'J.'s father.'

(23) **So** pare de Toni. (Pad.)  
 his father of Toni  
 'T.'s father.'

A possible objection against a movement analysis of clitic possessives comes from agreement in Nissart. Weak possessives do not agree, thus supporting the intuition that weak elements are deficient. However, clitic possessives agree in gender: in this respect, they seem to be 'richer' than their weak counterpart.

Furthermore, cliticisation does not account for many characteristics of French-type possessives. First of all, it is not clear to me what prevents the formation of clitic clusters formed by the combination of determiners and possessives, in the same way in which subject and object clitics can be combined forming complex clitic sequences.

By the same token, it is not clear to me why possessives cannot climb to verbs, like other D elements do:

(24) a. il **la** rentre dans le garage (**la** voiture) (Fr.)  
 b.\*il **sa** rentre dans le garage (**sa** voiture)  
 he= it=puts.away in the garage the car

In particular, it is not clear to me why possessives cannot cliticise to an indefinite D: in principle, nothing prevents clitic possessives from yielding an indefinite reading, but in fact this is not the case:



- (25) a. Mon ami (fr.)  
           ‘my friend / \*a friend of mine’  
 b. lou/un mieu amic (Niss.)  
           ‘my friend / a friend of mine’

The unavailability of the indefinite reading with clitic possessives means that French-like possessives are not clitic counterparts of the adjectival possessives of the Nissart-type; rather, French possessives are a particular type of definite determiner.

Further evidence for the inherently definite nature of “clitic” possessives comes from the extraction of dative clitic possessives. In French this construction is limited to datives of inalienable possessions (Vergnaud and Zubizarreta 1992), whereas in Nissart and Italo-Romance – i.e. in languages with adjectival possessives – the DP can be introduced the definite article and no possessive modifier is required within the DP:

- (26) a. On **lui** a volé **\*la/sa** mobylette. (Fr)  
           one to.him has stolen \*the/his moped  
 b. **Li** an roubat **la** (siéu) mobileta. (Nissart)  
           to.him= they.have stolen the his moped  
 c. **Gli** hanno rubato **la** (sua) vespa. (It.)  
           to.him= they.have stolen the his moped  
           ‘They stole his moped.’

Another property that the hypothesis of cliticisation cannot account for is the asymmetry between plural and singular kinship nouns in languages such as Nissart. Recall that in Nissart, like in Italian and in many northern Italo-Romance dialects, only singular, non-modified kinship nouns co-occur with clitic possessives. Why plurality or modification would prevent possessives from cliticising to D?

To address this point, we first must explain why kinship nouns select a specific form of the possessive. (Giusti 2015) claims that rigid designators such as proper names and kinship nouns have a reduced DP structure, in which no Functional Projection occurs between D and N.

Unlike proper names, kinship nouns project an argument in N’s thematic field, which needs to be overtly realized. When the argument of kinship nouns is realized by a possessive, it must be merged in D as no intermediate position is available between N and D.

If other layers of structure are added to the reduced DP (to merge modifiers or express plurality), DPs must have an extended structure and the possessive can be harboured in the canonical prenominal position, between the article and the noun.

In my opinion, a better understanding of cross-linguistic variation could be attained by assuming a parameter regarding whether the D position and the position hosting possessives are different heads or a single syncretic head. Three possible systems are envisaged:

- Languages in which D/Poss are always syncretic (Gallo-Romance, except Nissart); in these languages possessives always merge in D.
- Languages in which D/Poss are never syncretic (Italo-Romance, including standard Italian); with kinship nouns, possessives are allowed to move to D (this explains why in these languages “weak” and “clitic” possessives have the same exponent).
- Languages in which D/Poss are syncretic, but only in reduced DPs, i.e. with singular non-modified kinship nouns (Nissart). These languages exhibit two series of preverbal possessives: adjectival possessives occur in extended DPs, “clitic” possessives occur in reduced DPs.

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