

## NORTHERN MANSI POSSESSIVE SUFFIXES IN NON-POSSESSIVE FUNCTION

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**Abstract.** Research on possessive suffixes in Ob-Ugric languages, as in most Uralic languages, has primarily viewed them in the light of their terminological denomination – i.e., as markers of possessive relations, traditionally referred to as their prototypic use. Whenever this onomasiology-based approach fails, the usage of possessive suffixes is considered non-prototypical; a secondary or determinative function of possessive suffixes is cited. In my paper, I will claim that the original function of possessive suffixes in Ob-Ugric languages is not to denote a possessive relation and, in consequence, there is no concept of non-prototypical use. Instead, possessive suffixes denote a relation between two entities, whose default interpretation is a possessive one. I will claim that both, the prototypic and the non-prototypic use is an outcome of the very same property of possessive suffixes, which is to establish reference. In consequence, possessive suffixes play an important role in information structure.

**Keywords:** Ob-Ugric languages, possessive suffixes, reference-point construction, non-prototypical use, anaphoric and deictic reference, information structure

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### 1. Introduction

Possessive suffixes constitute a set of personal markers and are attached to nominal stems. They are involved in the structure of so-called attributive possessive constructions<sup>1</sup> in most Uralic languages. This paper deals with the use of possessive suffixes in the Northern Dialects of the Ob-Ugric language Mansi and is based on data taken from the synchronic corpus analysis of my doctoral thesis.

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1 This paper deals with attributive/adnominal possessive constructions, i.e. constructions in which the relation of possessor and possessum is expressed in a noun phrase (cf. McGregor 2009: 2). Therefore the term *possessive construction* refers only to this type of construction in this paper. Others structures such as predicative possessive constructions are not included in this analysis, neither is the usage of possessive suffixes in constructions with other parts of speech – verbal nouns and postpositions.

According to their terminological definition, constructions with possessive suffixes denote possessive relations of various kinds. In these constructions, the noun bearing the possessive suffix serves as the head of the construction. The head is usually referred to as the *possessum* (the terms *possessee* or *possessed* are also common). The possessive suffix encodes the referent that serves as the *possessor* in person and number, and agrees in number with the possessum. The possessor can occur overtly as a noun or a pronoun preceding the head as a modifier. This kind of possessive construction is thus a head-marked, head-final noun phrase. Whether the possessor occurs overtly or not is *inter alia* depending on pragmatic factors (see section 4).

**Table 1.** Variation of the attributive possessive construction in Ob-Ugric languages

	Modifier	Head	
	possessor	possessum	
	▼	▼	
a)	noun	noun	
b)	noun	noun	-PX
c)	pronoun	noun	-PX
d)	∅	noun	-PX

In a considerable amount of cases a possessive reading of the relation between the head and the modifier is excluded, even in using the most abstract interpretation of possession:

- (1) Northern Mansi (NM\_text\_008\_0036)<sup>2</sup>

*xum tujt-e ja:ŋk-e paryalt-i*  
 man snow-SG<3SG ice-SG<3SG shake.off-PRS.3SG

‘The man shakes snow and ice off (his coat)’.

2 Examples are glossed according to the convention of the Leipzig Glossing Rules with a few exceptions. In order to reflect the encoding of two referents at once, possessive suffixes are not glossed with Poss, but for person and number, the gloss is modeled after the following pattern: number of possessum < person and number of possessor. This glossing is based on the conventions of the EuroBabel project on Ob-Ugric languages (<http://www.babel.gwi.uni-muenchen.de>). The labels of the examples refer to their coding in my own corpus.

Such cases, where the so-called prototypical use of possessive suffixes (i.e. denoting a possessive relation) fails to serve as an explanation, are frequently subsumed under the node of non-prototypical use and a secondary, non-possessive function is attributed to possessive suffixes. This secondary function is, e.g., likened to the properties of a definite article (cf. e.g. Gerland 2014 and Fraurud 2001; for a summary cf. Nikolaeva 2003). However, even if it is not possible to constitute a literal possessor, the possessive suffix is yet a personal marker. In my eyes, at least in the Ob-Ugric languages, neither a distinction between prototypical and non-prototypical use, nor an assumed secondary, definiteness marking function of possessive suffixes do yield a satisfying description of all properties of possessive suffixes.

The aim of this paper is thus to analyze the functions of possessive suffixes with respect to their underlying inherent nature: a set of personal markers, establishing references and playing a role in the information structure of a discourse. Depending on the person encoded in the respective suffix, references can be either anaphoric or deictic.

The following section will give an overview over the semantics of possessive constructions. This will show that even in this context the notion of *possession* does not sufficiently cover all readings of this type of construction. The third section then concentrates on the underlying principle that enables possessive constructions to express relations, which is referentiality. In section four I will outline how the referential properties of possessive suffixes are used in information structuring in Ob-Ugric languages. The last, concluding section might then serve as a starting point for further reanalysis and reinterpretation of possessive suffixes and the terminology used to describe them.

## 2. Semantics of possessive constructions

The linguistic concept of possession<sup>3</sup> seems to be universal. Every language has at least one linguistic device to express relations generally referred to as possession (Langacker 1995: 51). The notion of possession itself, though, is purely abstract and can just be understood as a “broader concept of association or relationship between two nouns” (Aikhenvald and Dixon 2012: 2). While the definition is an abstract

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3 The term *possession* is exclusively used in the linguistic sense here. If necessary, literal possession in terms of legal property is referred to as *ownership*.

collective term, there is a broad consensus among linguists that certain prototypical meanings are covered by the concept of possession. These are: part-whole relations (example 2), kinship relations (both by blood and marriage, example 3), ownership relations (example 4) and a fourth column, covering all kinds of association in general (example 5) (e.g. attribution, properties or orientation/location) (Aikhenvald and Dixon 2012: 3–5).

- (2) Northern Mansi (NM\_text\_001\_0065:2)

*towl-anel*      *xoram-əŋ-əy*      *jemt-ey-t*  
 wing-PL<3PL    beauty-ADJZR-TRNS    become-PRS-3PL

‘Their wings become beautiful.’

- (3) Northern Mansi (NM\_text\_001\_0028:1)

*apsi-te*                              *jayayi-te*      *nupəl*      *law-i*  
 younger.brother-SG<3SG    sister-SG<3SG    towards    say-PRS.3SG

‘The younger brother says to his sister.’

- (4) Northern Mansi (NM\_text\_003\_0080)

*E:kʷa piyrisi*    *apəy*      *sʷoxr-in*      *tinal-eln*  
 E:kʷa piyrisi    nephew    knife-SG<2SG    sell-IMP.SG<2SG

‘Ekwa piyrisi, nephew, sell your knife to us.’

- (5) Northern Mansi (NM\_text\_001\_0044:1)

*molal*    *xuj-am*                              *ma-te-n*  
 once    sleep-PTCP.PST    land-SG<3SG-DLAT

‘To the place where he once slept.’

While the first two categories are more or less defined and unambiguous, the distinction between the latter two is more controversial. It is established that, across languages, possessive constructions rarely denote literal ownership and there is no reason why greater importance should be ascribed to these than to other relations (cf. Lyons 1983: 327), except for cultural and social values (cf. Aikhenvald and Dixon 2012: 1). I thus prefer joining ownership relations and association in general together and distinguish these from kinship and part-whole relations by one crucial point: semantic word classes (cf. Löbner 1998). Nouns denoting the possessum in kinship and part-whole relations are

so-called *relational nouns*; they are inherently associated with another concept. Several studies in possession are based on this classification. For example, Chris Barker distinguishes *lexical possessives* (i.e., relational nouns) and *extrinsic possessives* (Barker 1995: 8). While this helps to shed light on certain aspects, like, e.g. possessive constructions and their alienability constraints, such a distinction cannot serve as the sole explanation as to which components can be part of possessive constructions in general. In my opinion, rather than trying to postulate a certain semantic value for all kinds of relations in order to define the possessive construction, it makes more sense to approach the nature of possessive constructions from the other side: if one wants to express a relation between two nouns, the possessive construction is used (and nouns inherently implying a relation to another noun are by default or even obligatorily construed as part of constructions expressing relations). The possessive construction therefore must be regarded as a *relational concept* (McGregor 2009: 1) itself, rather than a construction labeled with a certain semantic meaning, i.e., possession.

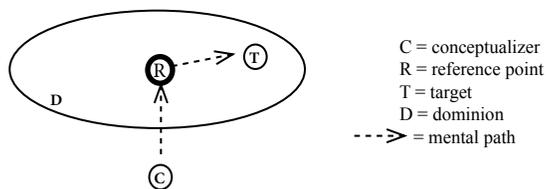
The same applies to possessive suffixes. They do not bear an inherent possessive meaning as might be suggested by the term used to describe them, but rather are morphological markers used in constructions denoting relations generally referred to as possession. As the label *possessive* does not perfectly fit the construction in question, the term *possessive suffix* does not perfectly fit the morpheme in question, and is somewhat misleading. As a consequence, the occurrence of possessive suffixes in non-possessive constructions (i.e., constructions which neither denote kinship nor a part-whole relation, and which do not properly fit into the category of abstract possession) has led to a description of possessive suffixes in their so-called non-prototypical use. A secondary function has been assigned to them, often referred to as definiteness-marking function (cf. Gerland 2014, Künnap 2004 and Fraurud 2001). While this approach focuses on an important principle of possessive constructions – to which I will refer as *accessibility* (covered in the following sections) – it also to me implies a possible grammatical change resulting in a double-track application of the suffix, as a marker of possession on the one hand, and a marker of non-possessive functions on the other. However, I consider the underlying property of possessive suffixes equivalent in both cases.

If it is not (exclusively) a semantic factor that expresses the relation between two entities, and if possessive suffixes do not inherently express a certain semantic meaning, it must be the construction itself

that establishes a relation between two entities. This leads to the crucial question of what role possessive suffixes play in all these constructions expressing possessive as well as non-possessive relations. This is the topic of the following section.

### 3. Referentiality of possessive constructions

The following section presents an analysis of possessive constructions within the cognitivist reference-point model (this has already been adapted on Uralic languages by, e.g., Tolcsvai Nagy 2004, Nikolaeva 2003). From a cognitivist point of view, possessive constructions are considered as reference-point constructions of a sort, where “the reference-point model is simply the idea that we commonly invoke the conception of one entity for purposes of establishing mental contact with another” (Langacker 1995: 58), sometimes without even being aware of using it (Langacker 1993: 5). Reference point constructions basically consist of a *conceptualizer* (usually the speaker) who intends to establish a relation, a *target entity* (which corresponds to the possessum) and a *reference point* (representing to the possessor). The speaker links the target entity to the reference point. Both the target entity and the reference point are within a certain *dominion* (the range of concepts serving as reference points or targets):



**Figure 1.** The reference-point model according to Langacker (Langacker 1993: 6).

In terms of cognitive linguistics, possession can be regarded as a universal category in which “the reference point model (involving the use of a reference point to establish mental contact with a target) is always inherent” (Langacker 1995: 61), while concepts like ownership, kinship or part-whole relations serve as category prototype(s) (cf. Langacker 1995).

*Establishing mental contact* with an entity means “to single it out for individual conscious awareness” (Langacker 1995: 58), i.e., referring to an entity in a way that the speaker and the hearer can unambiguously identify a specific referent. As regards the possessive construction, this is maintained by linking the target entity to another one – the possessor. In other words, one entity is anchored through reference to another one and thus becomes accessible to the hearer.

While the possessive construction itself denotes the relation between target and reference point, possessive markers (case markers, clitics and personal possessive markers) formally link two nouns in order to indicate this relationship (Langacker 1995: 61). In this respect, possessive suffixes are peculiar: they are not only formal markers of possessive constructions, they are pro-forms (Loos et al. 2004a), that encode the respective referent serving as the reference point in person and number. In Ugric languages this head marking with possessive suffixes sufficiently substitutes a reference point. Thus, possessive suffixes are referential devices themselves. Depending on the person of the encoded reference point, possessive suffixes create deictic or anaphoric references and as a set of personal markers they are well designed for establishing mental contact, as “it is far more natural and efficient to use a person as a ‘mental address’ for locating” (Langacker 1995: 59). They thus are perfectly compatible with the reference-point model. Deictic references occur e.g., when using the speech act participants themselves (generally referred to with 1st and 2nd persons) as exophoric reference-points:

(6) Northern Mansi (NM\_text\_013\_0029)

*mir-um*            *pussən amki*        *ka:t-um*            *wos*    *pat-i*  
 people-SG<1SG    all            1SG EMPH    hand-SG<1SG    HORT    start-PRS.3SG  
 ‘All my people shall be in my hands.’

Anaphoric references through the 3rd person possessive suffixes conform to the reference point model in that an antecedent of the referent serves as an endophoric reference point (the possessive suffix in (7c) refers to the direct object of (7a) and to the subject of (7b) (the sons), the sample sentences follow one another immediately in the text):

(7) Northern Mansi (NM\_text\_004\_0001 – NM\_text\_004\_0003:1)

a. *pes pora-t o:jka xu:rəm pi:y o:n's'i-i*  
 old age-LOC old.man three boy have-PRS.3SG

‘In the olden times there lived a man who had three sons.’

b. *jomas janiy piyris'i-it*  
 good big son-PL

‘Good, strapping sons.’

c. *a:si-anəl la:w-i*  
 father-SG<3PL say-PRS.3SG

‘Their father said.’

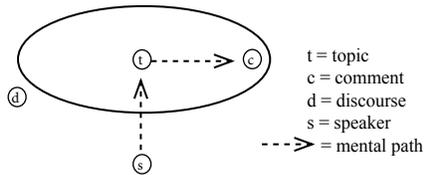
Moreover, a reference point must have a “certain cognitive salience, either intrinsic or contextually determined” (Langacker 1993: 6). In other words, in order to serve as a reference point, an entity must be an accessible, thus an unambiguously identifiable referent. Possessive suffixes encoding first and second persons – representing the speech act participants – denote inherently salient reference points due to their participation in the discourse, while the accessibility of the reference point is assured for third person possessive suffixes as well – at least in the pro-drop Ob-Ugric languages. Only unambiguously identifiable referents, i.e., topics, can be encoded with possessive suffixes<sup>4</sup>. By encoding topics, possessive suffixes help to establish the information structure in a discourse. This will be shown in the next section with examples from the Ob-Ugric languages.

#### 4. Information structure and possessive constructions

There is a striking resemblance between the inherent features of reference points, and those assigned to the topic of a sentence. The pragmatic notion of *topic* is what the sentence is about, whereas the *comment* provides new information on that topic (Loos et al. 2004b and 2004c). A reference point is “a salient entity evoked for purposes of

4 In Hungarian, the possessive suffix is obligatory in all possessive constructions (Forgács 2007<sup>3</sup>: 137), while the Ob-Ugric languages also have a second, unmarked possessive construction.

mentally accessing another” while a topic in cognitivism is considered to be a “mental ‘address’ to which some notion is ‘delivered’ [...] for discourse purposes” (Langacker 1993: 24). In other words, a topic serves as a reference point to which new information (the target) is anchored within the dominion of a discourse. This confirms to the reference-point model shown in figure 2:



**Figure 2.** The reference-point model applied to discourse<sup>5</sup>.

The speaker’s estimate of the hearer’s knowledge is a crucial factor in this anchoring; if the hearer is not aware of the topic, processing of new information fails. Speaker’s intentions are also important: which information does he want to sustain, which information does he want to focus on? Both factors are subsumed under the notion of *information structure* (cf. Krifka 2008). The following examples will show the role of possessive suffixes in information structuring. The samples are in the Ob-Ugric Mansi language and are taken from the corpus of my doctoral thesis<sup>6</sup>. The text corpus consists mostly of narratives and tales. Texts of this type are well qualified to demonstrate the interaction between information structure and the use of possessive suffixes throughout a coherent text. A typical Ob-Ugric narrative recounts the adventures of a main protagonist, in Mansi the stories about *E:k<sup>w</sup>a piyris<sup>j</sup>* are a prominent example of this.

In these tales, the notion of *topic* can be interpreted in line with the pragmatic role of the (primary) topic, corresponding with the main protagonist. The design of the narrative thread is a mirror of topic continuity (cf. Givón 1983): the primary topic is the subject of the sentence whenever possible, resulting in topic chains sustained throughout almost the whole story. This primary topic is the most salient and accessible referent, and thus serves as an anchor for introducing new referents

<sup>5</sup> Reference-point model by Langacker (Langacker 1993: 6); adapted by myself.

<sup>6</sup> The Ob-Ugric texts samples are contained in the corpus of the EuroBabel project on Ob-Ugric languages, accessible via [http://www.babel.gwi.uni-muenchen.de/index.php?abfrage=corpus\\_pub&subnavi=corpus\\_pub](http://www.babel.gwi.uni-muenchen.de/index.php?abfrage=corpus_pub&subnavi=corpus_pub)

into the ongoing action of the story. This happens through possessive constructions used as proposed by John R. Taylor (cf. Taylor 1996):

- (8) Northern Mansi (NM\_text\_007\_0031:1)

*sujpil*      *lupta*   *paŋxwit*      *josa-ŋ*      *xum-ite*  
 lingonberry leaf    in.width.of    ski-ADJZR    man-SG<3SG

*s'an-e*              *nupəl*      *potərt-i*  
 mother-SG<3SG    towards    tell-PRS.3SG

‘The man with skis, small like lingonberry leaves, tells his mother.’

This strategy is not only used to introduce new referents, but also to re-introduce referents that have not been involved in the action for some time. They are anchored to a more them to a more recently used referent (a topic), as shown in example (9) below (note the sequential numbers in the label – there are 44 sentences between 9a. and 9b).

- (9) Northern Mansi (NM\_text\_001\_0033:1 and NM\_text\_001\_0077:1)

a. *ula*   *te-m*              *aŋk<sup>w</sup>al-əγ*      *luw-e*  
 fire    eat-PTCP.PST    stump-TRNS    horse-SG<3SG

‘His horse (turned) into a charred log.’

b. *luw-e*              *saŋxwas-as-te*  
 horse-SG<3SG    kick-PST-SG<3SG

‘He kicked his horse.’

And even two referents already participating in the ongoing action can be linked with possessive suffixes, as shown in example (10). The personal verbal marker in 10a refers to the subject (*E:k<sup>w</sup>a piyris<sup>ʃ</sup>*, the main protagonist) and the direct object (the *mother*) at once, i.e. both subject and direct object are aforementioned and thus topical. However, not until sentence (10b) both entities are linked in a relation which is marked with the possessive suffix, the relation itself being the new information (highlighted with the particle *nasa.ti*):

## (10) Northern Mansi (NM\_text\_004\_0073:1and NM\_text\_004\_0073:2)

a. *tu:wəl xan's'-əs-te*then know-PST-SG<3SG<sup>7</sup>

'Then he recognized her.'

b. *taw s'a:n'-e nasa:vi*

3SG mother-SG&lt;3SG as.it.turns.out

'As it turned out, she (was) his mother.'

Therefore, the introduction of discourse-new referents is not the only or even primary function of possessive constructions. They also re-introduce referents from earlier stages of the discourse, or connect discourse-old referents to each other. The relation itself then has the status of new information, i.e., the comment.

Another effect associated with the use of possessive suffixes appears when one takes the discourse context into consideration: topic shift, or turn taking (example 11).

## (11) Northern Mansi (NM\_text\_007\_0030:1 – NM\_text\_007\_0031:1)

a. *kol ala-n nox= xaŋx-əs*

house roof-DLAT up climb-PST[3SG]

'he climbed onto the roof of the house.'

b. *s'owal sunt-nəl jolal' xuntl-i*

hearth opening-ABL downwards look-PRS[3SG]

'he looks down through the opening of the hearth.'

c. *sujpil lupta paŋxwit josa-ŋ xum-ite*

lingonberry leaf in.width.of ski-adjzr man-SG&lt;3SG

*s'an-e nupəl potərt-i*

mother-SG&lt;3SG towards tell-PRS[3SG]

'The man with skis, small like lingonberry leaves, tells his mother.'

7 The glossing of the objective conjugation is also according on the conventions of the EuroBabel project on Ob-Ugric languages (<http://www.babel.gwi.uni-muenchen.de>) and modeled after the following pattern (analogous to that of possessive suffixes): number of direct object < person and number of subject.

While examples (8), (9) and (10) reflect a sustention, i.e., topic-continuity, the referent in example (11c) marked with the possessive suffix is reintroduced in this sentence and will be acting as the primary topic in the following sentences. In the preceding sentences of this segment in the story, the antagonist is subject and primary topic (11a and 11b) and serves as reference point to which the subject of (11c) is anchored with a possessive suffix in order to achieve accessibility. At the same time the speaker's attention from this sentence on directs to this target (i.e. the speaker is shifting the topic).

This is even more visible in example (12), where the first sentence denotes a joint action of two referents (12a), only one of which is pursued in the immediately following sentence (12b):

(12) Northern Mansi (NM\_text\_007\_0027:3 and NM\_text\_007\_0028:1)

a. *kittəy ta min-as-əy*  
 apart FOC go-PST-3DU

‘The two of them went apart.’

b. *man'si janiy ojka-te noms-i*  
 Mansi big old.man-SG<3SG think-PRS.3SG

‘The tall Mansi man thinks.’

While the sustention of topic chains is considered an anaphoric phenomenon, the focusing on a shifted topic resembles a deictic procedure, following Peter Bosch's definition: as “a linguistic means to achieve the focusing of the hearer's attention towards a specific item” (Bosch 1983: 56). Thus, the use of 3rd person singular possessive suffix might, in certain contexts, also be regarded as a text-deictic procedure (cf. Hellish 1982).

This section aimed to provide a sketch of the manifold properties in information structuring in Ob-Ugric languages through possessive suffixes, without claiming to be exhaustive.

## 5. Conclusion

The intention of this paper was to promote the underlying property of a set of nominal personal markers, obscured by terminological denomination due to assumed prototypical meanings or by accounts on

secondary functions due to assumed non-prototypical uses. This underlying property is referentiality.

Therefore, my aim is to in the first place concentrate on the role of possessive suffixes as referential devices and the effects on information structure. The result could lead to a characterization of possessive suffixes as follows:

- (01) A set of nominal personal markers, that is
- (02) used in reference-point constructions to (a) formally indicate the link of target and reference point and (b) to establish references by encoding the respective reference-point in person and number.
- (03) The reference-point itself has to be aforementioned in order to be encoded with a pro-form. Thus, the target is anchored to a sentence topic and becomes accessible to the hearer (this accessibility of the target is often referred to as the determinative function of possessive suffixes).
- (04) This property is used for information structuring, both for sustention and focusing.

These (preliminary) characteristics of possessive suffixes in Ob-Ugric languages are but a starting point and further research is needed to cover all properties of the manifold use of possessive suffixes in Ob-Ugric languages as well as other Uralic languages. Further research might also provide further evidence that it is necessary to rename possessive suffixes in order to include their essential features in the denomination (e.g., a set of nominal personal discourse-specific relational markers).

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## Abbreviations

In the glossings appear the following abbreviations not included in Leipzig glossing rules: FOC – focus particle, ADJZR – adjectivizer, DLAT – dative-lative case, EMPH – emphatic particle, HORT – hortative particle, TRNS – translative.

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**Kokkuvõte. Gwen Eva Janda: Mansi põhjamurrete possessiivsufiksidi tähendustes, mis pole seotud omamisega.** Obi ugri keeltes, nagu uurali keeltes üldiselt, on possessiivsufiksidi uurimine olnud eelkõige seotud nende tüpoloogiliselt oletatud põhifunktsiooniga: omamissuhteid väljendavate liidetenä, mida traditsiooniliselt nimetatakse "prototüüpiliseks tähenduseks". Kui see meetod ei sobi, räägitakse "ebaprototüüpsest tähendusest", sekundaarsest ehk deterministlikust funktsioonist. Käesolevas artiklis väidan, et sufiksidi algfunktsioon ei ole omamissuhte markeerimine ja et seega ei saa rääkida ka ebaprototüüpsest funktsioonist. Selle asemel näitab possessiivsufiksidi kahe objekti vahelist suhet, mida vaikumisi tõlgendatakse omamise tähenduses. Lisaks väidan, et nii "prototüüpne" kui ka "ebaprototüüpne" kasutamine tuleb possessiivsufiksidi samast omadusest, milleks on seose loomine. Selles osas on possessiivsufiksidi diskursuse struktureerimisel oluline roll.

**Märksõnad:** ugri keeled, possessiivsufiksidi, referentsi loomine, ebaprototüüpne tähendus, anafoorid ja deiksis, infostruktuur