

Optional definiteness in Balochi and Kurdish:  
conceptual and empirical issues

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Geoffrey Haig  
Bamberg

If definiteness is construed as arising from identifiability (or inclusiveness, Lyons 1999), the notion of 'optional definiteness' would appear problematic. After all, if identifiability has been assigned within a given discourse, it is difficult to see how it can be retracted. Certainly for the better-researched languages of north-western Europe, definite articles (or paradigmatically alternating devices) are generally obligatory with NP's whose reference is assumed to be identifiable and unique. Nevertheless, a number of languages are known to have morphemes primarily marking definiteness, but which are not obligatory in all the relevant environments (e.g. Hausa (Chadic), Newman (1981), see Becker (2018) for additional examples).

In this talk I report on ongoing collaborative research conducted with Maryam Nourzaei (Uppsala/Bamberg) on Balochi and Kurdish, both Iranian languages (Indo-European), which exhibit optional definiteness marking, though to varying degrees. Capturing the variability of these systems, and setting up a framework for cross-linguistic comparison, poses empirical challenges, which we tackle with a combination of corpus and questionnaire-based methods. Finally, I take up two broader issues that appear to be relevant in framing explanations: the diachronic sources of the markers concerned (they cannot be traced back to demonstratives), and the (culture-specific) relationship between definite expressions, and proper names.