

The “definite article” in Mlabri

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Abstract

Mlabri exhibits features which are unexpected in Mon-Khmer languages (and in part unexpected even in other language families of Southeast Asia). This paper deals with one of these features: a determiner whose function can be characterized to a first approximation by dubbing it a “definite article”. It has a variety of uses and sub-meanings, which are here illustrated with a variety of field data before a sweeping generalization is attempted. It is argued that the overall function of the determiner is to define a referent as salient (relevant and expected) within the topic of discourse, rather than to encode anaphoric or deictic reference. Moreover, contrary to the definite article of some western languages, for example, the Mlabri determiner in question cannot be explained etymologically by tracing its origin to a demonstrative. Although the documentation contained in this paper may seem unnecessarily extensive there are two reasons for that abundance of data. Firstly, the paper presents three different varieties of Mlabri in Thailand and Laos; secondly, it is the author’s hope that the paper may be seen as a step towards counterbalancing the extreme scarcity of published data illustrating Mlabri grammar and discourse.

1. Introduction: general characteristics of Mlabri

Mlabri syntax has several features which are unexpected in a Mon-Khmer language spoken in inner Mainland Southeast Asia. This paper deals with a subset of these features. By way of introduction I shall briefly characterize how other characteristics of the Mlabri language (lexicon, word formation) make it look both similar and dissimilar to Mon-Khmer and Austroasiatic in general.

As is well-known, the Mlabri language is spoken by small groups of families, who used to live as hunter-gatherers. Most are now settled in villages but some (mainly in Laos) still manage to live in their traditional way. The proper translation of *m̥laʔ briːʔ* is ‘forest people’. They refer to their language in the same way, unless they are more explicit: *ɕmbɛp m̥laʔ briːʔ* ‘the mouth of the forest people’. It has recently become customary to spell the ethnonym in one word but with two capital letters: **MlaBri**, whereas the language is variably spelt **MlaBri** or **Mlabri** (in addition to a variety of spurious spellings and inappropriate terms appearing in the literature, such as Mrabri, Phi Tong Luang and Yumbri). I now prefer to make an orthographical distinction so that **Mlabri** unambiguously is the name of the language.

Based on rather superficial lexical comparison Mlabri has been classified as belonging to a Khmuic branch of Northern Mon-Khmer. A phonological criterion for the existence of a Khmuic branch was given fairly recently by Gérard Diffloth in the form of a sound-law (Diffloth 1998) which in informal paraphrase says that wordforms with PMK intervocalic **h* have lost this consonant in Khmuic. The Mlabri word for ‘blood’, *mɛɛm*, with contraction of **VhV* into a long vowel, thus confirms its Khmuic connection, whatever the nature of that connection.

A subset of Khmuic languages, Khmu (Kammu) and Tin Mal and Tin Prai (also called Lua’), are spoken close to the pockets in which Mlabri is spoken, on both sides of the northwestern Thailand-Laos border. Mlabri shares significant vocabulary with Tin in particular, and with Khmuic in general. It also shares some word formation mechanisms with Khmu and Tin. Taken together, these pieces of evidence suggest a fairly close genetic relatedness, and it is even possible to establish a “Tinic” subbranch comprising Mal, Prai and Mlabri (Rischel 1989; Rischel 2003).

The lexical support for such a Khmuic pedigree is slender, however, since several of the shared words look like loans from the other languages into Mlabri (Rischel, *ibid.*). Theraphan (1992:45) makes a very important point in favour of the assumption of borrowing: “an examination of all my Mlabri data for 24 lexical items said by Diffloth to be restricted to the Khmuic branch turned up only two [three?, JR] Mlabri words that may be genetically related to his strictly ‘Khmuic’ items: /ʔjɛʔ/ ‘far’, /cəpaʔ/ ‘soft-shelled turtle’, and /wɤk/ ‘to drink’. This evidence suggests that Mlabri may not be a member of the Khmuic branch. (...)” To the few words mentioned by Theraphan one should add that Mlabri shares the old Khmuic set of numerals from one to ten (Rischel 1997:281-282; Diffloth 1998), but that may also be a matter of borrowing, of course. It is my own impression that most of the Mlabri lexicon has no known Khmu and Tin cognates at all. That is obviously due, to some degree, to lexical innovation but it also suggests old layers of non-Khmuic or even non-Austroasiatic vocabulary.

Mlabri has a proliferation of morphologically indivisible wordforms consisting of a presyllable plus a main syllable. This high incidence of derivationally opaque sesquisyllabicity sets Mlabri off from the otherwise closest Khmuic languages. As for Tin, it must be conceded that Tin has undergone a massive reduction or loss of prefixation so that most of that is only rudimentary in present-day Tin. Khmu, however, is conservative in its retention of derivational morphology but still looks different from Mlabri, so the high degree of unexplained sesquisyllabicity in Mlabri may not be a relic of a Khmuic ancestor language.

This complex linguistic scenario, giving Mlabri a rather unique position among the allegedly Khmuic languages, must be seen in connection with the fact that the Mlabri are traditionally hunter-gatherers though they live among highlander groups that are villagers and have no known past history as anything but villagers. Speculations about the origin of the Mlabri language will undoubtedly be fuelled by the recent biological finding that the Mlabri

may descend from a few individuals that formed a family group less than a thousand years ago (Oota et al. 2005).

2. Expected and unexpected syntactic devices

Although Mon-Khmer languages have strategies for encoding syntactic relations they do not always seem to exploit them very much, with the exception of word order. The repertory of “function words” in such a language is often pretty much like what one finds in the locally dominant Tai languages, and some of them may be recent loans or calques. In addition there will be genuinely MK mechanisms such as cliticization or reduplication expressing modal and aspectual features, and pre- or infixation used to encode valency-changing (typically causative) constructions. In spite of their availability some of these categories may be rather scarcely represented in typical discourse patterns, however, and when such syntactic operators do occur it is not always easy to see what exactly they encode since one’s first impression may be that they are optional or more or less interchangeable. Maybe that is one reason why so few linguists have written about the syntax of “small” Mon-Khmer languages, information about such things having too often been left to dictionary entries (if covered at all). Bible translators have to cope with these challenges and may pursue more or less sophisticated discourse analysis in order to throw light on them but most often their insights do not make it to the linguistic literature.

Mlabri is at first sight no exception to the picture of a typical, “small” Mon-Khmer language presented above (cf. the sketch of Mlabri syntax in Rischel 1995: 133-194). Unexpectedly, however, Mlabri has two prenominal possessive pronouns *ot* ‘my’ and *mɛt* ‘your (sg.)’ standing in an inflection-like relationship to *oh* ‘I’ and *mɛh* ‘you’ (sg.), plus six particles which likewise fall outside the expected picture, *a*, *at* (or *ak*), *di*, *dɔ*, *i* and *ni*. To a very first approximation the particle *a* can be labelled ‘Perfective Marker’, *at/ak* can be labelled ‘Definite Article’, and *di* can be labelled ‘Possessive Particle’ or ‘Resultative Marker’ depending on its function as a prenominal or preverbal particle. The remaining three (*dɔ*, *i*, *ni*) are verb-linking particles with a purposive or contemporative meaning.

The particles in question obviously have widely different syntactic functions but they share significant characteristics: (i) they are extremely frequently used in discourse (though not all across all varieties of Mlabri); (ii) they serve to highlight context-sensitive, relational aspects within a proposition; (iii) they are not very Mon-Khmer-like, neither etymologically nor in terms of syntactic function.

These are the particles I tentatively refer to as “discourse-sensitive relational particles” for lack of a better term with a similarly broad coverage. They share a nucleus of abstract relational meaning and the information they convey is tied up with the general setting and presuppositions of the discourse. I contend that they have a function as discourse markers, but it is equally obvious that their existence paves the way for characteristic syntactic

configurations in the language. That gives Mlabri syntax a special profile, setting it off typologically from Khmuic languages such as Khmu and Tin (Mal, Prai). Assuming that those languages all have the same historical origin (which is still an open question in my view) a major typological change must have happened later within Mlabri, undoubtedly due to intimate contact with one or more languages outside Khmuic some time in the past.

In the present paper I shall deal with the particle *at/ak*, the “Definite Article” of Mlabri, which I now prefer to refer to with the somewhat clumsy label **Determiner Particle** or DetP, so as to avoid aprioric claims about its category membership. In subsequent papers I hope to follow this up with statements about some of the other particles referred to above, and eventually to round the whole set of presentations off with general conclusions about this typologically strange set of particles, their function and use.

To my knowledge, the only previous attempt to characterize the use of the DetP in some detail was in Rischel (1995:152-154). Back then I arrived at the conclusion that ?at “typically encodes referentiality in a specific way: via anaphoric reference to an explicit or implicit ‘possessor’” and that “[i]n that sense ?at may be categorized together with the possessive marker di, which often has a clearly *reflexive* meaning” (Rischel 1995:154). That formulation is infelicitous since it suggests that *at/ak* encodes anaphoric reference directly; the point is that it relates a noun phrase carrying it to a known referent. A major point of the present paper is to check to what extent that contention of mine back in 1995 holds water when tested against a much larger material comprising different varieties of Mlabri.

Most of the Mlabri examples stem from a Thesaurus in the making, in which I have organized specimens of fieldwork data lexicographically. Some of the examples given below, or analogous examples, were included in the lexicon and/or the syntactic sketch of my monograph on the moribund variety I have called “Minor Mlabri” (Rischel 1995), but the perspective of the present treatment is new. Moreover, this paper presents data from all of the three now known varieties of Mlabri: **A**, spoken in Nan and Phrae Provinces of Thailand (Egerod and Rischel 1987; Theraphan 1992), the mother-tongue of more than ninety per cent of all Mlabri speakers; **B**, “Minor Mlabri”, spoken until recently by a couple of families in Nan province of Thailand; **C**, Bernatzik’s “Yumbri”, spoken by less than thirty people in Sayaboury province of Laos (Rischel 2000; also see my introduction and commentary to Bernatzik, forthcoming). The three varieties of Mlabri are ethnolects (the sociolects of clan-like sub-groups) differing mainly in lexicon and only marginally in phonology and morphosyntax (A- and C-Mlabri being particularly close to each other). For most purposes generalizations across the ethnolects seem valid, i.e. examples from all of them can be pooled, though with some caution.

The data given in this paper may seem unnecessarily extensive. That is both because I want to make up for possible flaws in my data by presenting ample evidence for my claims and because there is so little published material on the language. I think, therefore, that it is appropriate to use this occasion to present some fairly reliable specimens of sentence-size linguistic data from

Mlabri with detailed translations. It must be added that I have much more extensive data for A- and B-Mlabri than I have so far for C-Mlabri. Nevertheless, there is a rather disproportionate number of examples from C-Mlabri in the data below because this is the variety of Mlabri that is least known so far (the only published word list, that of Bernatzik, dates back to 1938!), so I wanted readers to get access to fresh data. Some details of translation are uncertain because there has not been sufficient occasion to go back and recheck the field data, but that hardly jeopardizes the overall meanings of sentences.

3. The determiner particle *at/ak*

This particle is found initially in some noun phrases (or determiner phrases, if one prefers that terminology) and it always has a determiner function. The particle occurs in two variants *ak*, *at*, which are absolutely equivalent, the use of one or the other being speaker-dependent in A- and C-Mlabri whereas the variant *at* was totally dominant among the few B-Mlabri speakers who were still accessible in the late nineties. In A the variant *at* is used by some, mostly elderly speakers (Kraisri's word list of 1963 is not informative on this point) but nowadays there seems to be a strong preponderance of *ak* especially among young speakers. In C the preference for *ak* or *at* varies over speakers without any clear correlation with age (this is an old and apparently stable situation since both variants seem to occur in Bernatzik's "Yumbri" material of 1936-37 although he misunderstood the particle as being part of the nouns on which it is preposed). Because of its existence in all three varieties of Mlabri it seems reasonable to assume that *at* is the original form; *ak* may have arisen as a sandhi variant before velar onsets. In the remainder of this paper I avoid choosing one form as primary by referring to the function word in question as the Determiner Particle, or **DetP**.

4. Illustrating the uses of the determiner particle

The present survey of meanings of the DetP, with masses of exemplification from real speech, is based primarily on information I extracted from my field notes when I established a primitive Mlabri data base (a Pan-Mlabri Thesaurus) some years ago, drawing most of the phrasal examples in it from the lesser known varieties of Mlabri. It will be apparent that I have used a rather elaborate but crude taxonomy to account for the semantic and pragmatic range of the DetP, without any formal analysis in terms of orthogonal parameters. Thus kinship terms are given a separate section although they share properties with "ordinary" nouns, whereas other sections are based on grammatical properties or constructions, or on the nature of referentiality. This is a carry-over from my data base, as is the size of the examples. When I established the core of the data base (for the purpose of working towards a practical dictionary) I often had to truncate the raw data, i.e. lift sentences or shorter chunks of speech out of their wider context, in order to get the masses of material down to manageable proportions. My translations were, however, with few exceptions made during the original field session, based not only on the full utterances volunteered by the native

speakers but also on my apperception of the context in which each utterance occurred. Accordingly, I dare claim as a sweeping statement that the various examples below occur in my field data with the meanings given here (granting that there may have been occasional misunderstandings on my part, of course) but several of them might just as well have occurred in a different kind of context and then possibly with another meaning.

It is a commonplace that a referring expression used by a speaker on a particular occasion may or may not lend itself easily to pragmatic interpretation. It may in fact be impossible to track the referent the speaker had in mind unless the linguistic token is accompanied by a full record of the textual and situational context in which it occurred, e.g. in the form of a continuous video recording of each field session. I have been doing that extensively with narrative texts and explanations of traditional ways of doing things, but doing it across the board when collecting material for a Thesaurus of dictionary entries would hardly have been feasible since the processing of audio-visual data requires endless hours of working one’s way through overwhelming masses of information before the chunks of speech can be extracted and annotated properly. There would have been a gain when it comes to lexical items which have a specific pragmatic function, such as the DetP, but the lexical meanings of most lexical items are handled adequately enough (and incomparably faster) by the paper-and-pencil elicitation technique. In the absence of a full contextual characterization of each piece of data, my interpretation of the data I present in this paper is based on my general experience with the communicative use of this language coupled with the translations of data made in the field, as stated above.

Needless to say, the present, Thesaurus-based study of the DetP invites a follow-up in the form of analyses of extensive specimens of spontaneous conversation and narratives. Indeed, some of the examples below were drawn from narrative texts. It takes an enormous amount of text material, however, to illustrate the uses of such a particle adequately. Although my taxonomy below comprises a great number of examples of the DetP being used in statements, it is not the case that this particle occurs all over the place in narratives. On the contrary, when listening through some of my text data I found that the DetP is used very restrictedly (mainly when referring to the main actants of stories), so small-talk and active elicitation were really the ways I could go in order to secure a sufficiently variegated corpus of data.

A quite recent paper on methods in semantic fieldwork (Matthewson 2004) actually makes the point that in practice work with texts may not suffice to elucidate all the phenomena one is after, and that elicitation of data using a sound methodology is indispensable. Lisa Matthewson recommends to work interactively with native speakers, using criteria of judgment such as grammaticality and felicity. In my own work with the MlaBri I have been hesitant to use such metalinguistic tools out of fear of confusing the speakers many of whom are so eager to please the outsider, or so scared of doing something wrong, that they tend to accept whatever the field worker says.

Most of the raw-material used in this paper is only semi-elicited or entirely spontaneous, having arisen during extensive conversations over the years with native speakers whom I knew well. The MlaBri often engaged in small-talk or in serious debates about their life, forgetting about the linguistic vehicle of communication, but at other times they defined my role as being that of an apprentice with only a dismal command of their language, which had to be improved through contact with good and knowledgeable speakers. On each such encounter, whatever its nature, I took down sentences or shorter chunks of speech (including many single lexemes) which seemed lexically or grammatically interesting to me, and which I felt I had understood correctly within the framework in which they were uttered. I never attempted to create experimental situations so as to elucidate the presence or absence of the DetP in utterances with different kinds of referentiality. Thus I cannot make any claim as to exhaustiveness when it comes to the functions of that particle. Still, the material seems sufficiently rich to give a valid characterization of its use.

The vast majority of examples containing the DetP in my Thesaurus file lent themselves to the taxonomy presented below, although they were collected without such a categorization in mind, and although the linguistic samples in my field notes lack a pragmatic context much too often. The expression below is one of those on which I have had to give up:

bakalh at lam (C)
 break DET stick/wood
 ‘to break a/the(??) stick’

Without pragmatic context I cannot point to any other motivation for using the DetP above than a desire to individuate the object, which is not otherwise enough to make the DetP obligatory. Such occasional examples whose functionality or referentiality cannot be determined, were simply discarded and are left out below (as said already there are few of them in my raw data).

My first draft of the survey of usages presented below was based on a rigid separation between instances of generic and specific reference. A distribution of the raw data according to that criterion forced a host of arbitrary decisions, however. Instead, I chose a heuristic and highly hybrid (“pre-theoretical”) taxonomy in which a variety of formal criteria criss-crossed each other, several such criteria having emerged: subject versus object status of the noun carrying the DetP; unmarked versus marked word order; ordinary nouns versus kinship terms, etc. As supplementary criteria I have used specificity versus generality of statements and types of reference. These criteria do not constitute a hierarchy, of course, and that was not the point either. It was my modest measure of success whether the taxonomy served to divide the material into subsets each of which looked homogeneous both grammatically, semantically and referentially so as to make it easier to gain an overview of types of constructions in which the DetP occurs. That would seem to be a necessary prerequisite to any sweeping generalization, and it may also serve as a starting-point for further explorations, through interactive fieldwork, into the use of the DetP in Mlabri in case somebody takes up that challenge in the future.

Judging from the kinds of data I present here I would say that in probably most cases the distinction between generic and specific reference cannot be made on formal grounds at all but hinges on one’s understanding of a given utterance in a situational or narrative context. In my fieldwork it has happened several times that some event coinciding with the discourse situation triggered a seemingly generic statement (though I must concede that information about what happened around us during each field session is more often than not absent in my field notes). Such dual reference: specific and generic may serve a didactic purpose: the speaker presents a situation as being appropriate in a Mlabri context and at the same time gives a motivation for the actual occurrence of that situation. Thus the point of my attempts to pinpoint the type of reference in individual cases is not to make formal distinctions but rather to show the referential potential of the DetP (being subject to some restrictions, cf. 5.1 below).

When interpreting linguistic examples it is obviously useful to distinguish between (i) expressions which are overwhelmingly likely to have generic reference, (ii) expressions which are in themselves ambiguous over generic or specific reference, (iii) expressions which are overwhelmingly likely to have specific reference, and (iv) examples in which the referentiality is obscure or toned down. One should, however, not think too rigidly in terms of a dichotomy of generic versus specific reference. The use of the DetP in Mlabri (and indeed of the definite article in many western languages as well) strongly suggests that there is a third type of situational reference which is intermediate between generic and specific, and which dominates the function of the DetP in Mlabri. I shall return to that issue after my survey of raw data illustrating the use of the particle.

All linguistic examples below are provided with interlinear word-for-word translations, in which *at/ak* is simply glossed as ‘DET’, as well as interlinear paraphrases in English. In the paraphrases I have inserted definite and indefinite articles somewhat arbitrarily but hopefully largely in accordance with English usage, keeping the paraphrase in line with the meaning of the example (as I understood it when recording it) but without attempting to mirror the Mlabri use of the DetP directly.

The italicized phonetic notation used below is a “surface-phonemic” notation based on the IPA alphabet. It deviates from Rischel (1995) on the notation of initial aspirated stops, affricates and sibilants ($p^h t^h \text{c}^h k^h$ instead of *ph th ch kh*), glottalized stops ($b̚ d̚$ instead of *ʔb ʔd*) and final aspirated continuants ($j^h l^h r^h$ instead of *ç lh rh*). Moreover, I follow the current usage of several Mon-Khmer scholars by writing vowel-initial word forms without a redundant glottal-stop symbol ʔ in front of the vowel (*at/ak* rather than *ʔat/ʔak*, etc.) and by leaving out the reduced vowel of presyllables before sonorants (*krnot* rather than *kur.not*). Otherwise the two notational systems agree (I continue spelling the unaspirated palatals as stops: *c ɟ* = *c ɟ* although they are slightly affricated and might have been given as affricates). I follow the raw data entered in my Thesaurus of 2002 (which used a romanization with a bi-unique relationship to the IPA-notation) in that words with a phonemically long vowel have vowel shortening (thus becoming indistinguishable from short-vowel words) in certain syntactic environments. Similarly I follow my raw data in the spelling

of words which have phonemically distinct variant pronunciations, e.g. *ʃjo:ŋ* = *jo:ŋ* ‘man’. Otherwise, words occur in their lexical entry form.

The three varieties (ethnolects) of Mlabri are labelled (A), (B), and (C); note that several short phrases have been recorded in identical form from two or even from all three of these ethnolects.

I. Quoting lexical items

The DetP occurs on nouns or noun phrases (NPs) when naming things or genera so as to explain what things are called in Mlabri (to a child or to an outsider). The noun phrase may consist of the DetP plus a single noun or it may have material following after the noun which narrows the semantic range.

The following is an arbitrary selection out of masses of field data of this very kind, taken from sessions where I asked what something is called. There is an over-representation of examples from C-Mlabri because I want to make the point that the use of the DetP in quoting names of things is also found in that variety of the language. Otherwise, C-Mlabri has a characteristic use of the copula *la* ‘it is (called)’ without any DetP on the following noun. Thus, if one asks a MlaBri in Lao how to say ‘water’ in his or her language the answer is likely to be *la wɿ:k*, which literally means ‘it-is water’ although local non-MlaBri people have got it wrong so that it is now widely believed that the Mlabri word for ‘water’ is *lawɿ:k* (this is one of the pieces of inaccurate information that visitors are certain to be entertained with before even meeting the C-MlaBri themselves).

I.1 Giving lexical information out of context

This is a matter of quite arbitrary delivery of lexical information. The DetP may or may not occur on an ordinary noun. For convenience the examples below are divided into three subgroups.

I.1a. Concrete nouns (with or without modifiers)

<i>ak</i>	<i>bɛʔ</i>	<i>tu:n</i>	(A)
DET	soil	mole	
‘a mole hill’			
<i>ak</i>	<i>cəkɸuk</i>	<i>baj</i>	<i>cəboh</i> (C)
DET	hump(?)	big	mountain
‘a big mountain’			
<i>ak</i>	<i>dɔ:j</i>	<i>ɕibɛʔ</i>	(C)
DET	hill	low	
‘a low hill’			
<i>ak</i>	<i>likli:k</i>	<i>u:lh</i>	(C)
DET	charred	firewood	
‘embers’			

- I.1b. with metaphorical usage, e.g. seeing an artifact as having attributes resembling those of a human body:

ak mat (A, C)
DET eye
‘the bulb of a flashlight’

at ble:ŋ (B)
DET arm
‘the piston lever of an air pump’

at doŋ (B)
DET penis
‘the outlet tube of an air pump’

- I.1c. It is also appropriate to use an NP with a preposed DetP when explaining a more abstract notion such as the shape of something, e.g. a circular shape, or nominalizations denoting an activity:

at krwel (A, B)
DET spiral
‘a spiral (the shape of a snake that is coiled up)’

at krnot (B)
DET circle
‘a circle’

I.2 Giving lexical information in a context

A typical use is when denoting components of a person's or animal's body, or of his or her basic outfit, although the MlaBri may also name parts of any other complex structure, e.g. the speaker's home, a plant the parts of which are explained, or the landscape (cf. II.3 below for the very same proliferation of possible situations in which the DetP can be used, though in that case with specific reference). The DetP is preposed on the appropriate noun.

ak bloŋ ak k^hapu:k (A)
DET stalk DET inflorescence
‘the stalk and the inflorescence (of the rice plant)’

ak glɤ:ʔ (A)
DET head
‘the head’

ak glɤ:ʔ ɔ:n (A)
DET head soft
‘the brain’

ak mat (AC)
DET eye
‘the eye(s)’

<i>ak</i>	<i>kuri:w</i>	or	<i>ak</i>	<i>kuri:w</i>	<i>mat</i>	(A)
DET	arch		DET	brow/arch	eye	
'the eyebrow(s)'						
<i>at</i>	<i>hncok</i>	<i>ti:ʔ</i>	(B)			
DET	stalk	finger				
'a (branching) stalk'						
<i>ak</i>	<i>ɕejʔjaʔ</i>	<i>ak</i>	<i>ɕri:ŋ</i>	(C)		
DET	tendron	DET	tendron			
'Achilles' tendron'						
<i>ak</i>	<i>dal</i>	<i>ɕuh</i>	(C)			
DET	flat end	low				
'the sole of the foot'						
<i>ak</i>	<i>goguh</i>	<i>ak</i>	<i>biɿ:c</i>	(C)		
DET	skin/bark	DET	soft			
'the outer layer and the marrow (of a stem)'						

It may be explicitly stated that the speaker is delivering a piece of lexical information e.g. by a copula such as *la* or *ni* (it is the second occurrence of *ak* that is relevant in the example below)

<i>ak</i>	<i>tɣ naj</i>	<i>ni</i>	<i>ak</i>	<i>tre:k</i>	(C)
DET	inside	COPULA	DET	gill	
'what is inside (the gill slit of a fish) that's the gills'					

II. Ordinary nouns used referentially in (S)-V-(O) sentences

This is the most frequent use of the DetP in interactive fieldwork of the type I have been making. Most often the noun headed by the DetP functions as sentence object. The sentences under II are characterized by straightforward word order with the object (if there is any) after the verb. Marked word order for the purpose of focus also occurs, see under III below.

If such statements have been taken down during an interactive fieldwork setting, there is often a pragmatic vagueness as to whether the speaker is performing metalinguistically (“We say so-and-so”) or explaining the action itself to the listener (pretending or assuming that the latter is singularly ignorant). That vagueness may be present, for example, when it is carefully explained that you put your shirt on over the head (using one action verb) whereas you put your trousers on from below (using another action verb). By pretending that the addressee is ignorant the speaker can make such statements as part of a natural discourse.

II.1 The DetP occurs on the grammatical object of the verb, also semantically its object.

There are numerous instances of this construction. Although the DetP may simply cue deictic or anaphoric reference the construction is also very frequent in semi-didactic statements describing habitual actions, in which the

specific reference may be toned down or even absent in favour of generic reference. That is mirrored below.

- II.1a. The object is an inalienable part or basic outfit of the agent or the experiencer (typically it is a body-part, one’s offspring, or a garment). Such a statement may have a predominantly or completely generic reference but may of course also have specific reference.

bapɔ:n ak ε:w (A)
 bear DET child
 ‘to give birth to a child’

bɔʔ jak ak ε:w (A)
 carry on back go DET child
 ‘to walk carrying one’s child on one’s back’

brəŋ kɾap ak br-ɔ:ŋ (A)
 dog bite DET owner (‘property-of-area’)
 ‘the dog bit its owner’

paleh ak rɬlat (A)
 make-come DET tongue
 ‘stick the tongue out’

pɬak la kɔ joh ak kɭmu:j wɣ:ŋ (A)
 pick COPULA and pull out DET beard chin
 ‘pulls out hairs of the beard with jerks’

a ke:ŋ at cot (B)
 PERF carry on shoulder DET bag
 ‘I am carrying my bag on my shoulder’

bon-on dɔ:k at blɛ:ŋ at tiʔ lɔŋ du:t (B)
 hide put DET arm DET hand into back
 ‘she hid one arm and hand behind the back’

cɔk at tʰʌC tiʔ at tʰʌC blɛ:ŋ (B)
 bite DET flesh hand DET flesh arm
 ‘it (the snake) bit into the flesh of her hand and her arm’

lu:n at ɕarɛ: (B)
 pull off DET shirt
 ‘take the shirt off’

ɕoʔ ak dʌm (C)
 ache DET brain
 ‘I have a headache’

mɬaʔ tʰuɬtʰuɬ ak mɔh (C)
 man rub DET nose
 ‘the man rubs his nose’ or: ‘you rub your nose (you see)’

- II.1b. The DetP can occur on objects of other denotations which are integral ingredients in habitual actions. The object of the verb typically refers to a component of an every-day thing the state of which is changed crucially by manipulating the component in question. Again, there is likely to be generic reference involved, not just specific reference.

oh jak grawuulh ak hŋke:ʔ (A)
 I go fan (v) DET firewood
 ‘I am going to fan air to the fire’

The speaker is implementing a habitual action in a particular setting, his own home-place. Interestingly, the DetP is not grammatically obligatory otherwise. I was told that the action of operating the fan is called *grawuulh hŋke:ʔ*, i.e. with semantic incorporation of the object noun into the verb and loss of referentiality and hence no DetP (for a discussion of the notion “semantic incorporation” cf. van Geenhoven 1998:131-193).

pa:t ak ʔja:k (A)
 cut DET waste/excrements
 ‘cut loose the wax’

(the above expression describes one part of the habitual procedure of collecting honey and wax from wild bees’ nests)

plu:t ak brt^hol ni dor (A)
 peel DET hair LINK throw
 ‘peel the fur (of a mole for consumption) off and throw it away’

dʁŋ at ŋɔr, kwah (B)
 look DET section divide up
 ‘inspect the section and divide it into smaller parts’

(when the above utterance was recorded the speaker was partitioning and distributing an orange but it has a didactic and generic dimension as well: that is how you do it, and how you say it!)

ku:lhka:lh toc at u:lh (B)
 walk around fetch DET firewood
 ‘walk around gathering firewood’

(the expression above was said out of context to illustrate the use of the verb *ku:lhka:lh*; the DetP in *at u:lh* probably signals that the speaker was vividly describing the habitual action of getting a suitable supply of firewood for the home fireplace, which is essential for survival in the forest)

bak^haw ak ple:ʔ (C)
 button DET button
 ‘button a piece of garment (e.g. a shirt) (C)’

batɣp ak ple:ʔ (C)
 unbutton DET button
 ‘unbutton a piece of garment (e.g. a shirt)’ (C)

jak tuuŋ ak hmΛc i bjΛc (C)
 go steam DET rice Resultative soft
 ‘I shall steam the rice till it gets soft’

oh ɕi:ŋ ak thΛc a mot (C)
 1.p.sg.prn. eat DET meat PERF completely done
 ‘I am eating all the meat!’

paru? ak u:lh di ɕrɔŋ,
 dry DET firewood PURP dry
 ‘you dry the firewood by the fire, -’

ak u:lh a ɕrɔŋ a bato? (C)
 DET firewood PERF dry PERF burn
 ‘- and when the firewood is dry you burn it’

luh t^huʊm ak pu:k, pɤj dɔ ak kɛ:n (C)
 peel throw DET peel eat soft stuff just DET nucleus
 ‘(we) peel (the apple) and throw the peel away, just eat the pulp’

II.2 *The DetP occurs on an object noun functioning semantically as instrument, source, experiencer or goal.*

The noun carrying the DetP is formally the object of a verb in a serial construction but semantically the instrument, source, or goal of the action denoted by the main verb.

II.2a. The noun with the DetP is an alienable part or integral outfit of the agent (typically a body-part or a garment)

ek at lutlat lat (C)
 take DET tongue lick
 ‘to lick’

II.2b. The noun denotes whatever thing is crucial as instrument or source for the accomplishment of the activity denoted by the main verb

ek ak ɕapat, ɕapat hŋke:ʔ, a lu: (A)
 take DET fan (n) fan (v) firewood PERF be ablaze
 ‘blow with the fan until one has stirred up flames’

ek ak rɛ:lh ɣh kɔ:k (A)
 take DET root make pipe
 ‘make a pipe out of root wood’

toc at cuun krɛ:c (B)
 take DET sharp implement cut
 ‘we cut it with (the) scissors’

<i>toc</i>	<i>at</i>	<i>ʔjaː</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>pabɔʔ</i> ,	
take	DET	medicine	PERF	apply	
‘apply medicine on a wound -					
	<i>toc</i>	<i>at</i>	<i>hmɔʔ</i>	<i>bakpen</i>	(B)
	take	DET	bandage	apply	
- and then put a bandage on’					
<i>aw</i>	<i>ak</i>	<i>krniːl</i>		<i>kiːl</i>	(C)
take	DET	something-horizontal		attach (horizontally)	
‘put a horizontal log in place along the ridge of a roof’					
<i>toc</i>	<i>ak</i>	<i>ɕnralh</i>	<i>ɕnrɛː</i>		(C)
take	DET	shirt	put on a shirt		
‘put on the shirt’					

II.2c. The DetP may occur on the pivotal noun in a causative construction:

<i>ak</i>	<i>k^huː</i>	<i>basɔːn</i>	<i>ak</i>	<i>ɛːw</i>	<i>k^heːn naŋsuː</i>	(A)
DET	teacher	instruct	DET	child	study (‘write books’)	
‘the teacher instructs the children at school’						

(note that both the teacher and the children belong in the situation, hence the DetP on both)

II.2d. The DetP may occur on a noun denoting the goal (encoded as object):

<i>palap</i>	<i>ak</i>	<i>pak</i>	(C)
insert	DET	sheath	
‘put (one's knife) into its sheath’			

II.2e. The DetP may occur on a resultative object noun:

<i>oh</i>	<i>ɣh</i>	<i>at</i>	<i>krnot</i>	(B)
1.p.sg.prn.	make	DET	circle	
‘I draw a circle’				

II.2f. The DetP may occur on a nominalization denoting an activity thus probably profiling the activity:

<i>tɔŋ</i>	<i>ak</i>	<i>tmnɔŋ</i>	(A)
speak	DET	talking	
‘speak incessantly (without waiting for interventions)’			

In contradistinction a neutral way of conveying the abstract notion of engaging in conversation would be without the DetP: *tɔŋ tmnɔŋ* ‘to converse’.

II.3 The DetP occurs on a pragmatically salient subject noun

The subject noun must be really salient in the context in order to carry the DetP. Its discourse referent can be inferred from the setting (in contrast to

statements consisting of entirely new information and hence encoded without the DetP, e.g. *kwar a leh* ‘an outsider has arrived’). The occurrence of the DetP always signals a shared presupposition about the expectedness and relevance of the item referred to (so that it often borders on generic reference). The noun may be used with its basic meaning or with a metaphorical meaning (that is ignored below but cf. I.1b above).

II.3a. Straightforward subject-verb constructions

Sometimes, the referent of the noun headed by the DetP can be inferred from the beginning of the utterance if the listener draws on general knowledge about how things work in this world:

ɕalbut, ak t^hrary leh (A)
 decayed DET maggot come
 ‘it (the meat) is decayed; there are maggots in it!’

More often, however, it must be inferred from the conversational or narrative context. Unfortunately, as the examples below were taken from a lexicon file they lack the wider, textual or situational, context (e.g. that of a meal, attendance to a sick person, inspection of a defective implement, or whatever) which made the speaker and listener share a presupposition or knowledge and thus motivated the use of the DetP.

ak mat leh (A)
 DET eye come
 ‘the core of the abces is coming out (the abces is emptying itself)’

at lmbah a noŋ (B)
 DET cabbage PERF altogether
 ‘there is no more cabbage’

at t^hmbac ŋaʔ (B)
 DET hairs on stalk itch
 ‘the hairs on the stalk of the plant cause my skin to itch’

ak mat a bəɕih (C)
 DET eye PERF broken
 ‘the bulb (of the flashlight) is burnt out’

ak t^hapu:l gro:ʔ (C)
 DET stomach make sound
 ‘I have a rumbling stomach!’

II.3b. The construction has a characterizing or definitory function:

ak kaw sɔ:ŋ kloʔ ɕrkprak (A)
 DET horn two piece fork
 ‘it has two forked horns’

This statement was made to identify a deer species which is now extinct in the area (a more complex construction also serving to characterize or define a species, in that case the centipede, is presented in V.4 below).

II.4. The statement describes the interaction between different parts of a whole, both being encoded with the DetP

at naŋ mat pok at kwΛŋ (B)
DET skin eye hang down DET eyebulb
'the (his/her) eyelid hangs down over the eye'

II.5. The sentence has an existential verb with no formal subject but a verb complement encoded with the DetP

pro:lh at mɛ:m (B)
squirt DET blood
'blood is squirting out'

III. Ordinary nouns used referentially, with marked word order

The DetP accompanies marked, focus-signalling word order. It occurs on a non-agentive argument to the verb, typically the sentence object, which occurs in initial position thus having maximum focus by virtue of marked word order plus the DetP (less often there may also be an explicit agent in unmarked position just before the verb and encoded without the DetP). These sentences are typically didactic and thus generic statements explaining how one uses or produces certain items, but they may be triggered by something happening in the context of the discourse.

III.1 The focussed item is a regular sentence object

III.1a. In single-verb constructions:

ak klet kibɔ boŋ (A)
DET scale not eat meat
'one does not eat the scales (of that fish)'

at glɣ:ʔ ɔ:n kətΛŋ pɣ:j (A)
DET head soft however eat soft stuff
'but I/we eat (pig's) brain'

at la:j jwi:n oh a jwi:n (B)
DET pattern weave I PERF weave
'I weave a decoration on the brim of it'

ak ɕnralh an thuuŋ a lot (C)
DET shirt if hot PERF pull off over the head
'if it is hot you take off the shirt'

ak *gɣ:p* *mɭa:ʔ* *ɕup* (C)
 DET slipper(s) person put on
 ‘one puts slippers on (i.e. that is the term for that action)’

ak *gɣ:p* *ʃɣ:ŋ* *ɕup* *ni* *te:n* *jak*,
 DET slipper(s) foot put on to walk go
 ‘we put on slippers to walk, -’

batɣk *ni* *ɛm* (C)
 take off to sleep
 ‘we take them off to lay down’

ak *hnɣk* *ɕunɕɔ:n* *wɣ:k* (C)
 DET trap drag along water
 ‘move a trap along the water (to catch fish or crabs)’

ak *hwɣ:* *t^hmʔwok* (C)
 DET head prop on
 ‘put the cap on (a lighter)’

ak *trɭok* *tuŋ* *pɣ:j* (C)
 DET banana cluster boil eat soft stuff
 ‘we boil the banana cluster and eat it’

III.1b. In serial verb construction

ak *ɕo:ŋ* *toɕ* *t^hro:ʔ* (C)
 DET trousers take pull on over the legs
 ‘put one's trousers on’

III.2 The focussed item has the semantic role of instrument

Since I have no example with an explicit agent as subject one might perhaps claim that the instrument noun performs as subject of the verb. Under that analysis there is no marked word order (no “raising” of the instrument noun to initial position), of course. Note, however, that the first example below has an implicit agent as subject of the verb *jak* ‘go’ which supports the marked-word-order analysis (in principle, *jak* could perhaps be understood in a purely temporal sense: ‘the axe will fell the tree’, which would make the axe the subject/agent but when I recorded the example I clearly understood it as describing a habitual use of axes, not as a piece of information about a pending event).

ak *kwɛk* *jak* *dɛl* *lam* (A)
 DET axe go fell tree
 ‘you fell a tree with an axe’

ak *trnujɰh* *tuɰjɰh* *pre:ʔ* (A)
 DET pestle pound spices
 ‘pound spices (in a mortar)’

ak *ɕnrɛ:t* *ɕrɛ:t* *ŋwujɰwuj* *hwɣ:* (C)
 DET comb (N) comb (V) hair head
 ‘comb the hair with a comb’

ak ti? nuup joh (C)
DET hand pick pull jerkily
pull something out with a jerk (C)

ak ti? rujhrujh (or rather: *rujhruijh?*) (C)
DET hand rub
‘to rub with a finger (e.g. to rinse one’s teeth)’

III.3 *The focussed item has the semantic role of goal (destination)*

ak jon t^ho:η lap hlek lap ʔjaa (C)
DET pocket pour iron pour tobacco
‘one puts the lighter and the tobacco into one's pocket’

IV. *Experience-based general statements with unmarked order*

These utterances are about the behaviour or properties of things and are often clearly didactic. It may not be a coincidence that my examples are all about humans or animals. The DetP is generally used at least once in such an utterance. Its topic may be provoked by a real event in the discourse situation but the content may still be understood generically (the particle may be dispensed with if the discourse referent of the NP constitutes the setting in which another NP must be thus marked).

IV.1 *Expressions with the DetP on the agent/subject NP*

IV.1a. The agent or subject noun carrying the DetP refers to a subcategory of people:

ak crəη kəbə mac (A)
DET child not see/know
‘the children do not know about that’

(the sentence above was a comment to information about old traditions)

gəh hak tmnəη ak u:j theh təη (C)
this separately converse DET woman good speak
‘when talking about this the women speak well’

(the sentence above, said by a man, I construed to mean ‘women are better at expressing themselves about these matters than we men are’)

IV.1b. Occasionally the DetP occurs on a subject noun which refers to a species:

ak hwək jak dəmə weη (C)
DET mouse go one tunnel
‘the mouse moves through a single mousehole’

ak pmpo: ba:j gu:p (C)
 DET elephant big size colossal
 ‘the elephant is colossal’

ak rmpam bin (C)
 DET butterfly fly
 ‘the butterfly flies’

ak ʔyoc ʃrɤh (C)
 DET hen make characteristic sound
 ‘the hen clucks’

It must, however, be emphasized already here that statements about kinds of things such as animal species are typically encoded with a “bare” subject noun, i.e. **without the DetP**. I have a suspicion that sentences with the DetP such as those above serve to identify rather than describe the species they refer to (i.e., that the location established by the referential function is categorical, in the terminology of Thrane 1980). If so, the information common to the sentences above is something like: ‘I will tell you what the word X means: it is a species which looks/behaves as follows...’ This is exactly what people might be inclined to communicate to a field worker taking down lexical items and searching for illustrative sentences. Not that that interpretation is consistent with the lexical usage illustrated under heading A above.

IV.2 *DetP occurs on a non-topical NP denoting a phenomenon that is inalienable or at least closely associated with the, explicit or implicit, referent, typically the agent, that forms the topic of the discourse. The agent/subject is implicit or encoded without the DetP.*

ac pa:r ma hɣuh ak hmuŋ (A)
 bird fly come sit DET nest
 ‘birds fly to their nests’

leh ak k^haj (A)
 come DET egg
 ‘it (that species) lays eggs’

(said in contrast to the following statement about a species that does not brood on eggs:)

ʔjek leh ak ɛ:w (A)
 bee come DET child
 ‘(but) bees give birth to youngs’

mɤʔ lejɰ pɤʔ ak ple:ʔ (A)
 (tree species) have DET fruit
 ‘the m.l. tree has fruits’

bɛ: naŋ at ka:w (B)
 goat have DET horn
 ‘goats have horns’

(the above sentence is taken from a conversation with a man and his wife, so the referential meaning of the first kinship term is unambiguous here, though according to its literal meaning it might be expected to refer to another kind of relative, cf. that she calls her husband *mɔm* ‘Dad’, like in the second example below)

V.1b. The DetP occurs on the object noun:

crɤw at laŋ: ʔjɤh, mɤm ʃak ɡaŋɛŋ (C)
call DET husband hey! Dad go where
‘she shouts to her husband: “hey, where are you?”’

V.1c. The DetP occurs on a predicate noun:

ʃɤ:m ʃak ak jo:ŋ dəmɔj (C)
live go DET male a single one
‘(decide to) live as an unmarried man’

V.1d. The DetP occurs on two associated kinship terms, and the like.

The DetP occurs on both of two NPs referring to complementary actants or to interacting, closely associated kinspeople; similarly with animals and their youngs, etc. (some such statements can alternatively be understood in a generic sense).

at laŋ ʃɤ:h, at miɤ: ɤh (A)
DET husband call hey! DET wife answer yes!
‘the husband calls, his wife answers’

at ʃjo:ŋ ɡut ho:t at ɛ:w laŋ (B)
DET father think reach DET son
(literally:) ‘the father misses his son’

(the above sentence was said by an elderly man in the meaning of ‘I miss my son!’)

at ta:ʔ toc keh at nɔ:ʔ (B)
DET uncle receive embrace DET nephew
‘the uncle receives his nephew heartily’

Lexically, the Mlabri kinship terms *ta:ʔ*, *nɔ:ʔ* have a wider denotation, being terms for relatives of the second order. Off-hand, a more expected reading of the above sentence, out of context, might be ‘the grandfather receives his grandchild heartily’; it was, however, taken from a narrative about a sorcerer and his nephew.

at u:j krukkɤk at ɛ:w (B)
DET mother cluck DET child
‘the hen clucks to its chicken’

at u:j ʃak pabom at klwɔŋ (B)
DET female go brood DET round thing
‘the hen settles on its eggs’

ak u:j hŋɡɔh, ak jo:ŋ hŋɡɔh (C)
DET woman this thing DET man this thing
‘the women take this, the men take that!’

(the above sentence was said by a person distributing loads to be carried by tribespeople)

V.1e. The DetP occurs on a kinship term denoting location. The location can be encoded with a preposition:

boŋ neŋ at u:j (B)
eat with DET woman
‘they (the children) eat together with the women (or: mothers)’

jɤ:m ni at ʃjo:ŋ (B)
be at DET father
‘she stays with her father’

(said of a young girl not yet having a spouse)

or without a preposition:

grɔ:k ɕʌʔ jɤ:m at hma:j (B)
family group be DET wife
‘they are all with the wife’

V.1f. The DetP occurs on a noun denoting a “possessor”.

Semantically this is a matter of denoting a “relative-of-X”.

ɛ:w boʔ at u:j di bo:ʔ (B)
child breast(feed) DET mother POSS breast
‘the child sucks its mother's breast’

(this is one of the sentences which invite a generic understanding)

tm-oʔ tʰɔt at hma:j di blɛ:ŋ (B)
cobra tear DET wife POSS arm
‘the cobra tears at his wife's arm’

at ɛ:w di cʌŋ luclu:c (C)
DET child POSS tooth be hidden
‘the child's teeth are still hidden (in the gums)’ (C)

(this would also make sense as a generic statement about small children)

V.2 *Contrastive kinship or gender terms used metaphorically about tangible objects having complementary properties carry the DetP.*

at u:j – at jo:ŋ (B)
DET female DET male
‘the larger vs. the smaller of two halves’

The above terms can be used when something, e.g. an orange, is partitioned unevenly; note that the female part is the bigger one.

V.3 *Kinship/gender terms with the DetP may denote celestial objects.*

The referentiality is salient when such terms are supplied with the DetP (which may be absent e.g. in temporal expressions based on the position of celestial objects). Metaphorical kinship terms (also see VIII below) may be intermingled with nouns denoting such objects directly.

at *u:j* *at* *jo:ŋ* (A, C)
DET female DET male
‘the celestial couple’

(i.e. the constellation of the moon with the Morning Star or with the sun)

taki:ʔ *ni* *ak* *jo:ŋ*,
in morning COPULA DET male
‘in the morning there is the Sun, –

ni *lɛk* *ni* *ak* *u:j* (A)
in dusk COPULA DET female
– in the evening there is the Moon’

at *kiʔ* *at* *jo:ŋ* (C)
DET moon DET male
‘the Moon and the Morning Star (seen close to each other)

tɔj cuɔj *kɔ* *ak* *baj* *taʔ* *dɪŋ* (C)
downstream COPULA DET big size grandfather big
‘downstream (i.e. to the south) is the sun’

V.4 *Occasionally a predicative NP may be headed by a (pro)noun plus the particle at/ak so as to encode a specific relationship between two discourse referents. I keep it open for alternative analyses whether the (pro)noun plus the DetP should be considered as a complex determiner or whether the (pro)noun is a thematic entity to which the remainder is a comment (“as for X it is so that...”). The first and third examples below may invite the former analysis, whereas the second (also cf. II.3.b above) may invite the latter analysis:*

kwɔj *ak* *dɔ:ʔ* (A)
Banana tree DET undeveloped cluster
‘undeveloped banana cluster’

kindɛ:p *at* *tiʔ* *at* *ʃɔ:ŋ* *ɕɛʔ* (B)
centipede DET hand DET foot numerous
‘the centipede has many (fore- and hind-)legs’

gɔh *oh* *at* *ɛrw* *hman* (C)
this 1.p.sg.prm. DET child kinship term
‘this (person) is a younger relative belonging to my household’

This is a very rare type, however. In most cases the possessive pronouns *ot* ‘my’, *met* ‘your’ occur instead of **oh at*, **meh at* (it is a separate issue whether the two possessive pronouns have originated as contractions of these complexes or as contractions of **oh di*, **meh di*, see Section 6 below).

V.5 *The DetP occurs with certain numerals etc. used pronominally.*

Certain phrases containing a numeral (or a substantive used as a numeral) can be headed by the DetP and used pronominally to refer to persons, deictically or anaphorically. These expressions are typically used about members of a household having well-specified family roles such as father or mother or child).

- ak*

DET

bɛ:r

two

(A, B)
- ‘those two people’
- ak*

DET

bɛ:r

two

ak

DET

thɜ:ŋ

five

(A)
- ‘the group of persons’
- at*

DET

jum

group

(A, B, C)
- ‘the newly wed’

(the above is a protective circumscription to fend off hostile spirits or enemies)

- at*

DET

ti:ʔ

hand/eight

(AB)
- ‘he/she/they; the one(s) we are talking about’

this is highly frequent as a third person pronominal expression in B-Mlabri, cf. the following examples:

- at*

DET

ti:ʔ

hand/eight

na:jh

detest

mɭa:ʔ

MlaBri

(B)
- ‘they don’t like the MlaBri’
- do:j*

through

ja:k

thus

at

DET

ti:ʔ

hand/eight

(B)
- ‘that is the way they do it’
- ŋam*

listen

at

DET

ti:ʔ

hand/eight

gɭa:ʔ

speak

(B)
- ‘listen to what he/she has to say’

The term *at ti:ʔ* can also be used anaphorically, as in the following discourse between parents (note that the DetP does not occur on the antecedent):

dik t^hey jak ginεη? // at ti? jx:m neh! (B)
baby go where DET hand/eight be here
‘Where has (our) Baby gone?’ – ‘He/she is here!’

Another pronominal expression of similar function is

at cak (B)
DET body
‘he/she’

cf.

bar at cak (B)
property DET body
‘it is his/hers (B)’

One speaker explicitly explained the meaning of *at cak* by giving the following semantic equivalence (note that the DetP does not occur on the term *m_{la}:?* in the equivalent phrase):

at cak jak ginεη,
DET body go where
‘where did he/she go,

m_{la}:? jak ginεη, dəmo ηɔ:r (B)
man go where one way
and where did the person go, that is the same’

A pronominal term such as *at cak* can also occur in post-clausal position with a person as antecedent within the clause:

m_{la}? i pabul chi:η
man CONTEMP kill pig
‘the one who (or: when he) killed the pig,

jak ginεη, at cak (B)
go where DET body
where did he go?’

VI. The DetP used on predicative material

VI.1 Establishing a semantic contrast

The DetP can head a syntactic unit of a characterizing content, the resulting whole having specific reference and establishing a semantic contrast (implicitly or explicitly) with other components of the same setting. The syntactic unit may contain a noun or not; it often has a non-trivial internal syntax.

ak lɔj ?boh mat (A)
DET MOD size small
‘the small pieces (vs. something larger)’

ak baj gaw (C)
DET largeness big
'the big one (of two of different size)'

ak εw (C)
DET little one
'the small one'

VI.2 *On stative verbs used appositionally*

ki? a ɕuɣuɰh maː ak plɛːn (C)
moon PERF. far away come DET visible
'the moon returns and becomes visible (i.e., is now in the first quarter)'

VI.3 *In exclamations*

ak ʃɰjh (C)
DET be tasty
'that's tasty!' (well attested, frequent expression)

VII. *Terms denoting directions or orientations*

VII.1 *The DetP is used on NPs referring to locations being or extending out of eyesight (within the situation or in a narrative), the speaker assuming that the listener is well-informed about geography, local or universal.*

ləpot ak wɤːk (A)
descend into DET water
'goes down into the river; went down into the river'

ʃak k^huːn ak wɤːk (A)
go go up DET water
'goes upstream'

hɔːt ni at bεː? lɛːn (B)
reach in DET soil end
'they came to the end of the world'

(from a narrative about a sorcerer and his nephew)

oh ʃak ʃɤːm ak tokah (C)
1.p.sg.prn. go be DET bifurcation
'I am going to stay in the area of the bifurcating river'

The DetP occurs on NPs referring to directions or orientations in space, sometimes in unusual syntactic environments; in some of these the construction may also be possible without the DetP.

VII.2 *A locational, prepositional phrase headed by the DetP may function as a purely nominal argument to the verb:*

ak tɣ/ti naj (A, C)
 DET inside
 ‘inside; what is inside; the inside’

e.g. in explanations such as

ak tɣ naj ni ak trɛ:k (C)
 DET inside COPULA DET gill
 ‘what is inside (the gill slit of a fish) that’s the gills’

but the whole phrase can also function adverbially, as in

hɣuh ak tɣ/ti naj (A, C)
 be DET inside
 ‘be inside (it)’

similarly, with a dual function as NP or AdvP, we encounter

ak ti cuɣj (A, C)
 DET south
 ‘south; the south; to the south’

ak/at t^haŋ nu:ʔ (A, B, C)
 DET north
 ‘north; the north; to the north’

Occasionally, one may even encounter a combination of such a local expression with a pronominal expression, cf. the first occurrence of the DetP in the following passage from a narrative (the second DetP-phrase *at ti:ʔ* literally means ‘the hand’ or ‘the eight’ but functions as a pronoun, as stated in V.5 above):

at gɤh at ti:ʔ ci:n oh cok (B)
 DET here 3.p.prn. order 1.p.sg.prn. poke
 ‘he over here ordered me to poke’

VII.3 *When headed by the DetP, a noun denoting a position relative to the environment can be used adverbially (with or without taking a preposition):*

batit ak klɣj (A)
 closely DET layer(ed)
 ‘be situated in layers on top of each other’

jak ak knduul (A)
 walk DET rump
 ‘walk as the last person (in a file)’

jak ak klɤŋ (C)
walk DET middle
‘walk in the middle (of the file)’

Note that the just-cited construction could a priori be analysed in two ways, with *ak klɤŋ* being a subject predicate meaning ‘the middle one (the person in the middle)’, or with *ak klɤŋ* functioning adverbially, meaning ‘in the middle’. I am not sure whether both of these analyses are valid, or how one would distinguish between them in operational terms.

A prepositional phrase is also possible in similar instances:

ni at pruwŋ (B)
in DET interior
‘inside (it)’

VII.4 *When headed by the DetP, ordinary nouns denoting body parts may be used adverbially, with a directional meaning, cf. ak lupla:p ‘the nose’ in*

t^haŋ nuu:p ak lupla:p (C)
north(wards) DET nose
‘straight north following the nose’

VIII. *About cosmos, weather, and time*

The DetP is used in many instances when referring to phenomena of the universe which are assumed to exist over time and space, e.g. the moon and the sun, the seasons, or atmospheric events. There are a variety of expressions referring to those. Some such expressions were listed under V.3 above because they involve kinship terms used metaphorically.

VIII.1 *Complex NPs referring to recurrent calendric events*

at na:m gaŋ (A)
DET season sunshine
‘the hot season’

VIII.2 *Predications about cyclic events or the local weather*

Many such examples, if seen out of context, are ambiguous over two or three of the following meanings: (i) defining a certain recurrent state of affairs; (ii) positing that state of affairs as the setting in which something has taken or will take place; (ii) informing the listener that that state of affairs has been reached now (in the discourse situation or in the narrative).

ak u:j a diŋ (A)
DET female PERF big
‘(when) the moon is big (i.e. in the second quarter)’

ak u:j εj ta:k (A)
 DET female small size
 ‘(when) the moon is still small (i.e. in the first quarter)’

e:, ak ki? a leh (A)
 excl. DET Sun PERF come
 ‘see, the Sun (sic!) is up!’

at bε? a ruat (B)
 DET soil PERF dry up
 ‘the soil has dried up’

gan mε? hot
 if rain fall
 ‘if it rains,

ni a naŋ at gɔj (B)
 LINK PERF be DET liquid (soup)
 there is a flooding’

ak kla:l/kla:j bak^ha:w (C)
 DET sky white
 ‘the sky is light blue’

ak kla:j ni a t^hwεn (C)
 DET sky FILLER PERF red
 ‘the sky is red’

at p^halaŋ i jre:n (C)
 DET lightning PurposiveP stop
 ‘(perform magic) in order for the thunder to stop’

VIII.3 The DetP in indefinite quantification

The DetP occurs on the unit of measure or counting:

dʌlh dʁ: at tawen (B)
 number what DET sun
 ‘in how many days?’; ‘for how many days (already)?’

e.g. in a question such as

mεh pruk dʌlh dʁ: at tawen (B)
 you come number what DET sun
 ‘in how many days will you come?’

5. What are the functions of the Determiner Particle?

The DetP *at/ak* or (in alternative notation) *?at/?ak* has the status of determiner and is incompatible with the presence of other determiners or quantifiers at the head of the same noun phrase (granting that the pronoun *oh* ‘1.p.sg.’ is not a determiner but a separate constituent in the rare construction

oh at/ak X ‘my X’). That much is clear. It is a more difficult task to pinpoint what it encodes in terms of semantic and pragmatic meaning. The terminology has, therefore, been vague. In the first modern Mlabri-English vocabulary (Egerod and Rischel 1987:83) we listed the lexical entry *?ak* with the labels “preposed noun marker” and “article”, whereas we called it “the determiner (prenominal particle)” in a different publication the same year (Rischel and Egerod 1987:23). More recently (Rischel 1995:333) I have called it a “Definite Article”. That term requires some qualification since the use of the DetP in Mlabri overlaps fairly little with the use of the definite article in western languages, for example.

5.1 Negative characterization: conditions that fail to trigger the DetP

The range of functions and meanings of the DetP in Mlabri is very large. It may facilitate the overview to state first what this particle does **not** do, by generalizing over a repertory of well-understood expressions containing noun phrases in which the determiner is absent or at least can be dispensed with. Unfortunately, my Thesaurus was not designed to present information on the **absence** of this or that lexical item, so that kind of information can be retrieved only by searching through the innumerable “negative” examples scattered all over my Thesaurus and making generalizations over them, which is a formidable task. The set of syntactico-semantic and pragmatic conditions I present below is not based on an exhaustive search of that kind but it reflects my general, grammatical and phraseological, intuition after interactive fieldwork over twenty-two years and compilation and translation of many thousands of sentences spoken by the MlaBri.

I shall first present a set of negative conditions (nI-nIII) which are totally consistent with the association of the DetP with definiteness; they are in fact rather trivial from that perspective:

nI. The DetP **does not occur** on a noun if the noun is presented as part of **new information**, or if it has a **quite occasional discourse referent**

(i) Statements presenting totally new information, or referring to something that just happens to form part of the situation (the situation that is talked about or the communicative situation itself).

It may be the case that the whole proposition is new information (rather than being divisible into “topic” = old and “comment” = new), cf. the noun *kwar* forming part of the unpredictable information in

kwar *a* *leh*
outsider PERF come
‘there is/are some outsider(s) arriving’

The difference between alienable and (at least temporarily) inalienable relationships between actants can be coded by absence versus presence of the DetP on nouns referring to the actants. Thus a MlaBri feeling abused by some Hmong who temporarily employs him, may complain that he feels miserable because

mɛ:w paluh oh
 Hmong scold 1.p.sg.
 ‘I was abused by the/a Hmong’

(ii) The noun or noun phrase itself gives new information about a known referent, or information which the speaker wants to give salience by presenting it as important, cf. the noun phrase *mɫa? bri:?* in the copula-less sentence:

oh mɫa? bri:?
 I person forest
 ‘I am a MlaBri’

nII. In syntactic uses which **deprive the noun of specific referentiality** the DetP is **absent**. This has four important areas of application:

(i) expressions referring to time, the weather, and other extraneous conditions: these are, however, used without the DetP only if they occur in a strictly temporal or climatic sense, devoid of all referentiality.

(ii) attributive use of a noun (in the position after the head noun) deprives the noun of specific reference, cf. *bri:?* in the example *oh mɫa? bri:?* under Condition I above.

(iii) a noun occurring as the object of a verb may be semantically incorporated into the verb phrase, the whole phrase denoting a generalized notion: a habitual activity or property, for example. An example (chosen at random) is housebuilding:

xh gɛ:ŋ (A, B)
xh kr-uŋ (C)
 make roofed dwelling
 ‘build a house’

To eat pig, for example, in A-Mlabri *boŋ cɔbut*, likewise has this status in MlaBri culture:

oh ɕi bong cəbut (A)
 I desire eat pig
 ‘I would like to eat pig’s meat’

What is striking from an outsider’s perspective is that such semantic incorporation may not occur if the speaker specifies a particular option within a range of options, as in

bong at tap (A)
 eat DET liver
 ‘eat liver (rather than kidney, etc.)’

In I.1c above it was mentioned that even nouns denoting fairly abstract notions such as shapes may be quoted with the DetP. The object of a verb that

denotes a motion or curvature of such a shape is not automatically incorporated semantically; it may or may not carry the DetP, possibly depending on to what extent the speaker wants to highlight the affected area as a generic entity. Both of the following expressions were explained to me as carrying the notion of ‘making or drawing a circle around something’:

<i>kot</i>	<i>ak</i>	<i>ɛrhɨuh</i>	(A, obsolete expr.)
encircle	DET	place (sic?, cf. <i>hɨuh</i> ‘to be; to stay’)	
<i>oh</i>	<i>kot</i>	<i>trwi:l</i>	(B)
1.sg.prn.	encircle	circular area (or: circular disc)	

(iv) nouns governed by prepositions may or may not be treated as generalized notions, i.e. behave according to Condition nII. If, however, it is a matter of habitual activities or states a semantic contrast between options may be implied even if the DetP is absent, e.g.

<i>hɨuh</i>	<i>ni</i>	<i>gɛ:ŋ</i>	(A)
<i>jɤ:m</i>	<i>ni</i>	<i>gɛ:ŋ</i>	(B)
be	in	house	
‘be at home’			
<i>jak</i>	<i>luŋ</i>	<i>bri:ʔ</i>	(A)
go	into	forest	
‘go into the forest’			

Note that the range of implicit options may also cover habitual activities or states which can be stated without a prepositional phrase, i.e. with the noun semantically incorporated in a verb phrase:

<i>jak</i>	<i>ɤh</i>	<i>rmap</i>	(A)
go	work	dry field	
‘go to work in the dry field’			

nIII. The DetP seems **not** to occur on nouns or noun phrases which by themselves have **unique reference** for the persons involved in the conversation. They are typically kinship terms or other nouns used as proper names, with or without a name tag:

<i>mɤm</i>	(A, B, C)
father	
‘Dad’	
<i>ta</i>	<i>ɛrɤl</i> (A)
elder man	palm like tree species
‘Mr. Chroel’	

Some such expressions are clearly coined as protective terms so as to confuse evil spirits (or hostile strangers if they understand Mlabri) by tricking them to believe that there are several people present, e.g.

kwar mla:ʔ (B)
outsider man/MlaBri
‘My Spouse’ (address term used among newly-weds)

Noun phrases with a basic meaning that is neither relational (like kinship terms) nor has specific reference, may, however, be lexicalized as pronominal expressions or kinship terms provided with the DetP, e.g.

at ti:ʔ
DET hand/eight
‘he/she/they’

So much for rather predictable conditions for non-use of the DetP. Then there is, according to my appraisal of the data, a second set of conditions (nIV-nV), which are of a semantic and pragmatic nature. These negative conditions are **non-trivial** from the perspective of definiteness and reference and they may perhaps put into question the typological appropriateness of labelling *at/ak* a “Definite Article”. The first of these negative conditions (nIV) actually deprives the DetP of most of the functions that one would a priori ascribe to a definite article. It can be divided up in accordance with the type of reference involved:

nIV.1. Typically, the DetP **does not occur** on nouns in **generic statements**; they appear as “bare” nouns (cf., however, the examples under IV.1b in section 4 above):

kan mlaʔ prem kibi t^hεh a buul jak (B)
if man ancient not be good PERF die go
‘if people in old days were ill they just died’

lam naŋ wɔk (B)
tree have spirit
‘there are spirits in trees’

mε:w tɕl eʔ lam (B)
Hmong cultivate tuber tree
‘the Hmong cultivate the “e” lam” (a large tuber species)

mlaʔ kraw biuk jaŋ kɾεc (B)
man fear bear because bite
‘we fear the bear because it bites’

wɔk blak jɕ:m mlaʔ di ɕak (B)
spirit enter be man POSS chest
‘spirits enter people’s bodies’

wɔk rwa:j met t^hεh (B)
spirit tiger not be good
‘the tiger spirit is bad’

ʔje:k t^hu:c, lmŋɔ:r kɔ t^hu:c (B)
bee sting “lmngòr” (insect sp.) also sting
‘bees sting, and so do the lmngòr insects’

hwɔk mɔk jɔ:m tala:w (C)
mouse good be bamboo
‘the (“good mouse” =) bamboo rat lives in the bamboo thicket’

nIV.2. The DetP does not occur on **nouns denoting ethnic groups**, even if the speaker is referring to the locally relevant subset of such a group.

mɭa? hɲuh loŋ hmu? loŋ jum (A)
MlaBri stay with/in group with/in group
‘the MlaBri are all at home’

nIV.3. Typically, the DetP **does not occur** on nouns or noun phrases used **deictically** (their referents being present in the situation).

This is true of occasional observations (whereas the DetP may nevertheless occur if the discourse referent is a presupposed component of the setting). Such sentences may look just like generic statements. Thus, on a particular occasion when I was visiting a B-MlaBri family and a small child stared at me so that eventually I returned the glance, the man I was conversing with said the following, referring to both of us without the DetP:

mɭa? dɔŋ kwar, kwar dɔŋ mɭa:?
MlaBri watch outsider, outsider watch MlaBri

In another case, an A-MlaBri made a similar type of determinerless remark after he had volunteered to carry a pig which then bit him in the back, to the merriment of the bystanders and even of the victim himself:

cəbut krap mɭa:?
pig bite man

The use of the DetP on the arguments in such cases would probably imply some particular bond between the actants (cf. below).

It is tricky to translate the examples above (and other similar examples) as they stand because I have the feeling that such remarks lift the incidents up into the sphere of general human experience, being presented, more or less jokingly, as quasi-generic statements. That is totally lost in non-transcendental paraphrases such as ‘I saw that my little son looked at you, and you looked back’ and ‘That damned pig bit me!’.

nIV.4. The DetP **does not occur** on nouns or noun phrases used **anaphorically** (their referents having being introduced in the discourse already) except if there are independent reasons to do so.

If a story includes a discourse referent whose presence is a priori arbitrary it is likely to be encoded without the DetP no matter how salient it is in the narrative. As a pilot experiment I have looked for occurrences of the DetP in some fairly long narratives in B-Mlabri (each lasting close to ten minutes or more according to the tempo of delivery), one being a myth about the Great Flood and

its aftermath, another a story about a man encountering a turtle with fatal consequences, and a third a story about a couple meeting a snake with even more fatal consequences. In the myth the DetP is practically absent except for the reference to the raft people climbed to rescue themselves from the flooding: it is *at bε:* ‘the raft’. In the other two narratives the family members involved are referred to with expressions involving the DetP (“the husband”, etc.). The turtle and the snake are, however, not integral parts of a general MlaBri-life scenery; their presence is non-trivial and hence they are referred to as *gəɬo:ŋ* ‘turtle’ and *tm-o:ʔ* ‘cobra’, respectively, i.e. **without the DetP**. I have observed something similar in other stories as well.

One might suggest that the animal names in such tales have the status of proper names: Turtle, Cobra Snake. I see nothing in the tales to suggest that, however. The snake story carries the name *ɕatam ni tm-o:ʔ cɔk*, literally ‘story namely cobra bite’, i.e. ‘The story about the biting cobra’. The story is really about the vileness of the husband, however; the snake just enters the story when the husband is planning his evil deed and it leaves the story once his wife has fallen victim to it.

I would claim, therefore, that it is **not** a regular function of the DetP in Mlabri to establish anaphoric reference. If the discourse referent reappears repeatedly throughout a narrative one might expect the story-teller to start using either the DetP or a pronominal expression to express such referential cohesion within the narrative, but that is not what I observe. With an accidental (though essential) actant such as the biting cobra the noun denoting it carries the referentiality all by itself, and the listener must do the referent-tracking on that basis. If the persons acting in the story are encoded with the DetP that is for a different reason than anaphoric reference as such: they belong to the overall setting of the story.

Even then, the DetP can be dispensed with in some cases. A female A-MlaBri urged to narrate to me about life in the forest started out by portraying herself (*oh* ‘I’) as a character in the story but immediately distanced herself from it, talking from then on about “the husband”, “the wife” and “the children” of a model family. These were referred to most of the time with the DetP but towards the end of the narrative she just said *glaŋ* ‘husband’, *u:j* ‘wife’ a couple of times without bothering to use the DetP yet another time.

nV. In expressions denoting outer or inner states there is typically no DetP on the subject noun, which has no tangible referent.

(i) Forces of nature: rain, wind, thunder etc.

<i>mεʔ</i>	<i>hot</i>
rain	fall
‘it rains’	

rmuut *re:rw*
wind violent
‘there is a storm’

kuur *poh*
thunder hit
‘the lightning strikes’

(ii) Expressions referring to states of the mind, e.g.

klol *ju:r*
heart descend
‘feel happy’ (sic)

klol *k^hu:n* (A)
heart ascend
‘feel worried’

klol *a* *biΛc* (B)
heart PERF soft
‘feel sad’

5.2 Positive characterization of the use of the DetP

In 5.1 I attempted to characterize the use of the DetP in negative terms, by stating what it does **not** do in terms of referential meaning. The negative conditions I listed may have left the impression that there is little need for the DetP in Mlabri. Still, it will have appeared from section 4 above that this particle is abundantly represented in Mlabri discourse, maybe with the exception of a certain narrative style.

Switching now to positive formulations one can state that the use of the DetP draws heavily on world knowledge (characteristic features of animals, plants and the human body, recurrent natural phenomena, social patterns, customs, etc.) and on shared presuppositions about the basic organization of a given situation. Put briefly, the DetP seems to attach a presupposition to a noun to the effect that **its referent is relevant and expected** (thus confirming or establishing a consensus about the setting). This includes both so-called **situational** use and so-called **associative** use (referring to things which are not salient but whose role in the scenario can be inferred from what is said).

As for generic statements, my data (which strongly favour B- and C-Mlabri over A-Mlabri when it comes to such statements) suggest that a generic referent is mostly encoded without the DetP unless there are independent reasons to have it. One thing seems clear: **inalienable properties of a generic referent are encoded with the DetP**. The following is a particularly felicitous example (drawn from V.4 in the data collection above, originally cited in Rischel 1995:153):

kinde:p at ti? at ʃx:ŋ ɕɛʔ (B)
 centipede DET hand DET foot numerous
 ‘the centipede has many (fore- and hind-)legs’

Here, the centipede is the theme and is referred to generically without the DetP, whereas the remainder (the “rheme”) has a new topic: the animal’s legs, which are essential for the characterization of the animal. Animals are supposed to have legs as inalienable attributes and that in itself warrants the use of the DetP in Mlabri. Thus, from the perspective of Mlabri grammar there is nothing remarkable about the centipede-sentence (though it is remarkable from a contrastive point of view that the definite article in English happens to have exactly the reverse distribution).

6. Discussion: the origin and communicative function of the DetP

To sum up from the observations above, uses of the DetP trigger presuppositions about the setting. The speaker thereby draws on the listener’s expected knowledge about (i) the way things typically are in their culture, or in this world according to their world view, (ii) particulars to do with the type of situation referred to in the utterance. Therefore, a discourse referent can be encoded with the DetP without having been explicitly mentioned before. This is typical of explanatory statements. In narratives the actants are as a rule encoded with the DetP if they enter a functional relationship, e.g. “the husband” and “the wife”, “the elder brother” and “the younger brother”.

Those characterizations do not adequately define all the uses of the DetP. One comes part of the way, however, by stating that it serves a combination of two functions: to **individuate** a discourse referent and to signal that that referent is **an expected, integral or even inalienable part of the topic of the discourse, or of the whole discourse universe**. In contrast, the absence of the DetP in such a context may signal to the listener that the discourse referent is new and unpredictable information, or it may signal that the speaker is making a generic or quasi-generic statement.

It is difficult to tie that kind of referentiality to the notion of **definiteness** since that is by no means a simple notion (cf. Chesterman 1991 and Lyons 1999 for recent, broad treatments). Moreover, referentiality cuts across the distinction between definite and indefinite in languages that have such a distinction (the interpretation of constructions with indefinites actually raises major problems, cf. Diesing 1992).

Returning now to **referentiality**, the traditional notions of **generic** and **specific** (including **unique**) reference do not adequately capture the use of the DetP in Mlabri either. A great many of the examples in the raw data survey above are more or less ambiguous as to the status of their referent as generic or specific. In many cases that is a spurious dichotomy because the DetP helps to define the discourse referent of the noun in question as something that is salient within a given type of setting, whatever connection the communicated message has with the real world. Mentioning that one uses “the” axe when explaining the process of

felling trees means calling upon a certain subset of characteristics of the axe, as a concept, which are known to be relevant in the particular type of situation.

Thus one might say that the DetP in such cases marks the noun as being functionally integrated in the situation that is the topic of the discourse. In the hypothetical example above “the” axe could be any axe, and its status with respect to specific reference is irrelevant as long as it serves as “the” instrument for that kind of complex activity. Similarly if the DetP is used when talking about a woman carrying “the” child in a strap on her back. This characterization of the DetP in Mlabri falls within the range of usages which have been defined for the definite article in English, for example. It agrees particularly well with the way the definite article was approached by Otto Jespersen. Jespersen stresses that “the definition contained in the article” is situation-bound, and he finds that the so-called definite article *the* “would be better called the defining or determining article” (Jespersen 1924:109).

Mlabri is different, however, in that the use of the DetP is more restricted. According to my data the DetP **does not serve to signal discourse referents either generically, deictically or anaphorically unless there are additional reasons for doing so**. This suggests that it has a different origin than deictic (a typical origin of the definite article “in English and other languages” according to Lyons 1975:61). In fact, Mlabri has a different way of encoding explicit deictic reference, namely by means of demonstratives such as *gah* ‘here; this’ (ABC); *neh* ‘here; this’ (B,C), *naʔ* ‘there; that’ (B,C). Semantically, these may function as determiners on nouns (being often translatable as ‘this’ or ‘that’), but they then occur in a different position than *at/ak*, namely after the noun (with its possible adjuncts), as in

ge:ŋ *gah* (A)
house here/this
‘this house’

ləboʔ *naʔ* (B)
person there/that
‘that person’

also cf. the fixed expressions for the concept ‘today’:

ta:l *gah* (A) = *tawen* *neh* (BC)
daylight this sun this

Such a demonstrative can even contrast with a postnominal possessive modifier (e.g. a pronoun encoded without possessive morphology, the latter being possible only in prenominal position), as in

jum *gah* *mɬa:ʔ*, *jum* *mɛh* *kətəŋ* *kwər* (A)
group here MlaBri group 2.p.sg.prn. however outsider
‘we here are MlaBri, whereas your group are outsiders’

If attached to a noun the demonstratives clearly fill a different syntactic slot than the DetP or the possessive pronouns, all of which are obligatorily prenominal. Moreover, they bear absolutely no phonological resemblance to the DetP. Thus there is no way the DetP in Mlabri could have originated from a demonstrative. It is something quite different.

In my grammatical sketch of Minor Mlabri (Rischel 1995:154) I suggested instead that there might be an etymological parallelism between the DetP form *at* and the possessive pronouns *ot* ‘my’, *met* ‘your’. It is likely that the latter are contractions of *oh di*, *meh di*, i.e. *oh* ‘I’, *meh* ‘you’ plus the possessive marker *di*, since there is an apparent equivalence between the two sets of expressions, as stated in the first grammatical sketch of Mlabri (Theraphan 1992:54): “[i]nstead of the forms /ʔot mjʌ/ and /mɛt ʔɛw/, the full forms /ʔoh dɪ mjʌ/ ‘I-poss.-wife’ = ‘my wife’ and /mɛh dɪ ʔɛw/ ‘you-poss-child’ = ‘your child’ may be used”. It detracts slightly from the persuasiveness of this derivation that the A-Mlabri increasingly say *ok* instead of *ot* and (perhaps less often) *mek* instead of *met*, but that may be due to analogy from the present variation found in the DetP: *at/ak*, or the variation over *t* and *k* may be a sandhi-phenomenon which started earlier in the DetP than in the possessives.

Assuming that the possessive pronouns have the derivational history suggested above, the DetP might have arisen as a similar contraction of a non-singular first person pronoun *ah* plus the possessive marker *di*, thus originally meaning ‘our’ (*ah* occurs as a pronoun both in Tin and Mlabri; in Mlabri it denotes first person dual when standing alone but first person plural when followed by a collective term).

There is, in fact, a perfect syntactic parallelism between the DetP and the possessive pronouns; they fill the same determiner slot in prenominal position (the constructions below are grammatical across all three varieties of Mlabri):

<i>met</i> 2.p.sg.prn. ‘has your husband died?’	<i>glan</i> husband	<i>a</i> PERF	<i>bul</i> , die	<i>leh</i> Y/N-QUESTION
<i>ot</i> 1.p.sg.prn. ‘my husband has died’	<i>glan</i> husband	<i>a</i> PERF	<i>bul</i> die	
<i>ak/at</i> DET ‘her husband has died’	<i>glan</i> husband	<i>a</i> PERF	<i>bul</i> die	

As for the meaning part of the suggested etymology: ‘our X’ > ‘the X’, it would seem consistent with the potential of the DetP to refer to something as an expected part of the setting.

The etymology above hinges on the derivation of the possessive pronouns *ot*, *met* that has been posited by Theraphan and myself. One can hardly exclude another possibility, however, namely that those possessive pronouns arose as contracted reflexes of *oh at/ak*, *meh at/ak* (*oh ak X* is attested in the

data of section V.4 above), although they now behave like reflexes of the sequences *oh di*, *mɛh di*. If so, we have no etymology whatsoever for the DetP. One should perhaps leave its history unsettled for now for lack of decisive evidence.

7. Conclusion: what communicative goal does the DetP serve?

The DetP in Mlabri has something in common with the “definite article” in languages that are said to have such a category, but is also different. In languages of western type the definite article is typically used with nouns or noun phrases if they encode discourse referents the listener can identify, either because the referent is present, has been introduced earlier in the discourse, can be inferred (associative reference), or exists in this world according to common knowledge. Mlabri does not require a noun (with or without modifiers) as the structure the DetP is preposed to; on the other hand the DetP does not have such a broad range of applications as the western definite article. Generally speaking, it takes a more specific, relational type of reference (subsuming the notion of associative reference) to license the use of the DetP. In its most typical uses it defines the referent in relation to a frame, as something that “belongs” or “fits in”, **not** as something that is within range of the participants in the discourse or which has been talked about already.

As a maybe not very felicitous term for that kind of context-sensitive or situational reference I now suggest **integrative** reference. It seems that integrative reference is essentially what the use of the DetP in Mlabri is about, thus largely confirming my much less solidly based contention of 1995.

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