



When the definite article is used for possessive determiners in Kenyan English

Evidence of both systematic and free variation for the same user

Research Article

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1. Introduction

The literature on the use of articles in L2 varieties of English reports both the overuse and the underuse of the definite article. An excellent synoptic discussion of such apparently contradictory results is Sand (2004). Because L2 English varieties have developed in a sociolinguistic environment where they were in contact with indigenous languages, Sand (2004: 284–287) reviews what research findings show about ‘substrate influence on article use’. Two substrate languages she mentions (p. 286) as examples are Hindi (which is expected to have influenced Indian English) and Swahili (which is expected to have influenced Kenyan English). Regarding Indian English she writes: ‘Typically, we find reference to a “lack of articles” in descriptions of contact varieties like Indian English [. . .]’ (p. 286). But a few lines later she adds this:

However, Sedlatscheck (forthcoming: 105) also finds for his Indian data that, apart from zero articles, the largest number of what he calls ‘article substitutions’ occur in the category of the definite article. Thus, the definite article is used instead of the zero or indefinite article expected according to standard English usage. (p. 286)

The quotation above suggests that both some overuse and some underuse of the definite article can be observed in Indian English, thus making the possible influence of a substrate language like Hindi (reported not to have articles) not so relevant.

Swahili substrate influence does not seem to be relevant in KenE usage either. Swahili does not have articles, but, seemingly, this cannot explain the omission and the ‘wrong’ addition of the article *the* discussed by Buregeya (2019: 71–76). That is because both its omission and its addition are not general, cross-cutting phenomena: they are limited to few, highly specific linguistic contexts. The omission of *the* is limited to the following cases: i) before abbreviations, like *KBC (Kenya Broadcasting Corporation)*; ii) before unique institutions, like *University of Nairobi*; and iii) before the following phrases: *majority of, (Nairobi) area, (English) language, reason/question is. . .* For its part, its addition seems to be limited to only two cases: i) before *Standard English* and ii) before *Almighty God*.

There is no mention at all of the use of the definite article where a possessive determiner is expected in Standard International English (StdIntE) in Buregeya (2019), hence the justification for the present study. Yet, as the illustrative data in the next section suggest, the article *the* tends to replace possessive determiners, specifically third-person-reference ones (*her, his, their, its*). Thus, the phrase *the father* is more likely to be encountered than *her father* in a sentence like *We felt we should visit her because she’d lost the father*.

2. Data from KenE corpora and a novel

Only two corpora exist so far of KenE. The first is actually a sub-corpus of the East African component of the *International Corpus of English (ICE)* – hereafter *ICE-K*; the second is the Kenyan component of the *Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE)* – hereafter *GloWbE-KE*. The two corpora are quite different in design, representativeness and size: while *GloWbE* is composed only of written and only online material (Davies &

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Fuchs, 2015: 3), ICE has both a written and spoken component. (In the identification of the examples below from ICE-K, S signals 'spoken' and W 'written'.) In addition to ICE-K and GloWbE-KE, data were also obtained from *A Grain of Wheat* (hereafter AGoW), a novel published in 1967 by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, no doubt Kenya's best known novelist. From each of the three data sources, at least ten uses of *the* for possessive determiners will be highlighted (in bold type) for illustration.

2.1 Examples from ICE-K

- (1) [...] a normal husband would provide for **the** wife [...] uh an underaged getting married without a consent of **the** father (S1B033K)
- (2) [...] the authority for example for the father over **the** sons and daughters (S1B035K)
- (3) If it is the child you educate **the** father **the** mother and if it is **the** father you educate **the** wife and **the** children about diabetes (S1B041K)
- (4) [...] she should be given moral support by all those close to her [...] This includes **the** relatives neighbours and friends [...] **The** husband should be able to come a bit earlier [...] she has been all alone whole day when **the** husband was away at work [...] I emphasise here in Nairobi where we stay in the city uh mother-in-law is at home your sisters are at home in [...] Maybe **the** husband's [sisters] are also in [...] and it happens that it's only **the** mother and **the** father who are living in Nairobi [...] (S2B021K)
- (5) I looked at **the** father but his face registered innocence. Gachara was sitting with the baby on the floor when **the** father casually moved and sat on the chair next to the two. (W2F017K)
- (6) Kathanyi is the young man who has no mother and Mucumi is **the** step brother. [...] The two are in conflict with each other because Mucumi feels that his father favours Kathanyi. (W2A001K)
- (7) The Kiambu police had on tip gone to the couple's home last May where they arrested the parents along with **the** children. [...] For two weeks, they stayed in the Kiambu cells with **the** adoptive mother while investigations were going on. [...] **The** father remained in the Tigoni cells. (W2C023K)

2.2 Examples from GloWbE-KE

- (8) [...] As Mwangi talked, a picture of **the** mother, Grace Wairimu, began to emerge. (businessmagazine.com)
- (9) She had delivered while on her way coming to the clinic. **The** baby weighed 2.3kg and she was born premature and had blue extremities. [...] She was kept in the oxygen concentrator. I went and prayed with **the** mother. [...]. On Monday morning Praise God the baby improved miraculously and **the** mother was discharged in the afternoon. (indeedandtruth.org)
- (10) A friend's sent from no where decided to pack from school and brought property to **the** mother a single parent, and asked her to send another child to go in his place. Naturally **the** mother was devastated [...]. (elishagoodman.org)

- (11) The best mentor of the African girl child was **the** mother (mwende.co.ke)
- (12) [...] and so those of them who were, at the least, second generation born, whether through **the** father or **the** mother, were put on the same footing as their African compatriots. (awaazmagazine.com)
- (13) They have clear gender role models, in general, and therefore less identity confusion. The son looks to **the** father while the daughter does to **the** mother. (ollows.com)
- (14) In Karamojara when a woman cheats on **the** husband, **the** father and brother are required to [...] pay back the cattle brought during dowry. (actionaid.org)

2.3 Examples from (the original version of) AgoW¹

- (15) Then Gikonyo worked as a carpenter in Thabai. Though an immigrant to the ridge, he and his mother had been absorbed into the community and its daily rituals. He came to Thabai, a child strapped on **the** mother's back, from Elburgon area in the Rift Valley province where his father, Waruhiu, worked as a squatter on European farms. (p. 70).
- (16) What about this?' Wangari was not easily daunted. She loved to hear the voice of **the** son admonishing her. (p. 72)
- (17) The whiteman would silence the father and **the** orphans would be left without a helper. (p. 100)
- (18) Mumbi just looked at Gikonyo and the wall opposite. Wangari felt the pain of **the** son and the misery of **the** daughter. She searched her own heart for the healing word. (p. 109)
- (19) The steps in the pavement, the weeping child, and the image of the mother suckling **the** child, would always haunt him. (p. 112)
- (20) The boy staggered and fell on his back and burst into tears, looking to **the** mother for an explanation. (p. 159)
- (21) 'Gikonyo, what's all this about?' Wangari demanded from **the** son. (p. 159)
- (22) Suddenly the young man felt the moment had come. 'If you value your life,' he cried, 'don't touch her again.' At first **the** father was so surprised that his hand became numb in the air. (p. 201)
- (23) Arriving home drenched, Mumbi found Mbugua and Wanjiku drowsing by the fire, without talking; **the** child slept on the floor. (p. 219)

3. Discussion

3.1 When the can indeed be used for possessive determiners in StdIntE

A fitting background to the discussion of the use of the definite article *the* for possessive determiners in the examples above is the discussion by Quirk et al. (1985: 270–272) of instances where, in StdIntE usage, *the* can indeed be used instead of possessive determiners. Below is a summary of the authors' discussion:

[...] With reference to parts of the body and following a preposition, **the** is often used instead of possessive pronouns **my**, **your**, **her**, **their** [...], etc:

Mary banged herself on **the** forehead.

They pulled her by *the hair*.
 Everyone gave us a pat on *the back*.
 Don't keep digging me in *the ribs*.

In these examples, the personal pronoun or noun referring to the 'possessor' of the body part is the object, and the body part is a prepositional complement. (p. 270)

[...]

The restriction of this use of *the* to prepositional complements means that the possessive pronoun, rather than *the*, has to be used in such examples as:

Have you broken *your arm*? NOT: *Have you broken *the arm*? (p. 271)

Outside the above conditions, *the* is sometimes used instead of possessives in a masculine style of speech:

How's *the back*? [referring to an injury]

Let's have a look at *the arm*. [This is also what a doctor, of either sex, might say to a patient.]

Related to this usage is the habit of some men of referring to their wives, or children, by *the* <informal>:

How's *the wife*? [normally: *your wife*]

Wait till I tell *the wife* about it! [normally: *my wife*]

How are *the children/kids*? (p. 272)

Now, a close look at all the examples in (1) to (23), from our three KenE data sources will show that none of them refers to parts of the body and that none of them can be attributed to the 'masculine style of speech' either. Notice that in the examples in Quirk et al.'s (1985) discussion this latter possibility is illustrated by utterances directly addressed to someone, which is not the case with any of the 43 instances contained in examples (1) to (23): all of them refer to a third person, not to an addressee. For this same reason, none of them can be argued to be instances of 'the habit of some men of referring to their wives, or children, by *the*'. So, all in all none of these 43 uses of *the* is expected to be idiomatic in StdIntE.

Biber et al. (1999: 269) note that both the definite article and possessive determiners (together with demonstrative determiners) are 'definite determiners', in a paradigmatic relationship, and, hence, can be substituted one for another. However, the authors specify that '[t]he definite article is a more neutral determiner than the possessive forms, in that it marks an entity as known without specifying how it is related to other entities,' while '[p]ossessive determiners are particularly associated with human beings, and they characteristically serve to identify entities by their relationship to human beings' (p. 270). It becomes intriguing, therefore, why in KenE usage possessive forms are often replaced by the definite article in contexts where reference to human beings is involved. In fact, 84% (i.e. 36) of the 43 highlighted uses of *the* in (1) to (23) involve (direct) kinship nouns: *father, mother/adoptive mother, son/sons, daughter, the stepbrother, the wife, and the husband* (excluding the non-gender-specific nouns *parents, child/children, orphans, and relatives*).

3.2 Possible reasons why *the* is used for possessive determiners in KenE

The first reason to think of is that already alluded to by Sand (2004: 286), namely the influence of substrate languages, notably Swahili. However, Swahili influence, for example,

cannot be an appealing explanation because Swahili does not have articles. And neither do most (or maybe all?) of the other indigenous languages of Kenya. Consider example (24), extracted from example (5) above.

(24) *I looked at the father ...*
Nilimuangalia baba yake ...

In this Swahili translation, the equivalent of *the father* is *baba yake*, literally 'father of his'. No other translation of it would be correct. In relation to this, in all the illustrative 43 phrases in examples (1) to (23), if the Swahili structure were to be transferred into English, we would expect to see an obligatory possessive determiner in all of them. Therefore, a different explanation, one not drawing upon substrate influence, should be sought for why KenE uses e.g. *the father* for *his/her father*.

One plausible explanation has been suggested to me by my colleague Zipporah Otiso (p.c., 21 Dec 2022). She argues that KenE speakers use terms such as *the father* and *the mother* instead of *his/her father* and *his/her mother* because using a possessive determiner would be semantically redundant, as it is clear that in a sentence like (25) the NP *the father* can only refer to John's father and not to the speaker's², and that in (26) the NP *the mother* can only refer to Mary's mother, and not to the speaker's.

(25) *I met John and the father.*

(26) *I met Mary and the mother.*

So, she continues, there is no need to redundantly signal the relationship between the two people referred to. Zipporah Otiso's suggestion implies that in KenE speakers assume that both *the* and possessive determiners (*his/her/their/its*) have the same grammatical meaning, namely 'possession', in a phrase like *the mother*, presumably as long as this is not postmodified (as in *I met Jane and the mother of Andrew*). Her suggestion is a reasonable proposition. What remains to explain is how this assumption (gradually) took root in KenE usage.

The third possible explanation (for the use of *the mother* for *his/her/their mother*) constitutes a plausible answer to this *how*: it is that such usage developed from classroom instruction. In this regard, Mwangi et al. (2011: 40–41), while advocating the use of 'gender-neutral language when the gender is unknown or could be either masculine or feminine' in their book meant for secondary schools in Kenya, give the following advice as one of the options: 'Eliminate the pronoun', as in '*A careful writer proofreads the work before submitting it*'. It is obvious that the article *the* in this sentence has replaced *his, her, or their*. So, it is not difficult to see how such advice appearing in a textbook could influence usage. However, given that Mwangi et al.'s (2011) advice is relatively recent, it might not be enough to explain the uses of *the* for possessive determiners in AGoW, a novel published in 1967, that is four decades earlier. Nevertheless, that advice is given support by anecdotes like the following: when I asked a former undergraduate student of mine (now in his forties) why he had just used *the mother*

rather than *his mother*, he answered: ‘That’s what I was taught by my primary school teacher, Mrs Maina’ (Tom Kituku, p.c. 26 Dec 2022). To paraphrase it even more appropriately, that is what he and other pupils picked up from their teachers, who themselves picked it up from their own teachers, without being able to determine when the usage started becoming Kenyan, though.

3.3 The *and* possessive determiners used as variants across the three data sources

Whether any of the possible reasons suggested in the preceding section for the use of *the* for possessive determiners is solid enough or not may not be so important, after all. More important is the fact that, as the examples in (1) to (23) show, some (maybe all?) KenE speakers use both the definite article and possessive determiners in their speech. That is the case of the use of both *the step brother* and *his father* by the speaker in example (7) (from *ICE-K*), of the use of both *the father* and *the mother* vs. *their African compatriots* in example (13) (from *GloWbE-KE*), and of the use of both *the mother* and *his father* and *his mother* in example (16) (from *AGoW*). So, for these speakers, both the article *the* and a given possessive determiner co-exist in their idiolects and are used as variants. And it is the study of this user variability that is of greater interest.

But by way of background to an analysis of this variability, an overview of how the frequencies of occurrence of the two variants compare across our various data sources is needed. To this end, the pair of phrases *his father* vs *the father* and *his mother* vs *the mother*³ will be used for illustration because they already appear in examples (1) to (23) more frequently than all the other pairs. For its part, the possessive determiner *his* will represent all the others (*her, my, our, your, their, its*) because corpus data reported by Biber et al. (1999: 271) show that it is the most frequent of all. **Table 1** gives the relative frequencies of the phrases concerned, normalized per million words (pmw).

To put the relative frequencies in **Table 1** into their right perspective, here are the sizes of the respective sources: a) the novel *AGoW* is 87,686 words-long (this is its main text, excluding all introductory material); b) the written component of *ICE-K* that will be considered in this study is 361,724 words-long⁴; c) the spoken component of *ICE-K* is 289,625 words-long (Hudson-Ettle & Schmied, 1999: 56); d) *GloWbE-KE* is 41,069,085 words-long (Davies & Fuchs, 2015: 6).

Table 1. Occurrences of *his father* vs *the father* and of *his mother* vs *the mother* pmw in *AGoW*, *ICE-K* and *GloWbE-KE*

	<i>his father</i>	<i>the father</i>	<i>his mother</i>	<i>the mother</i>
<i>AGoW</i>	125	34	319	57
Written <i>ICE-K</i>	55.3	24.9	44.2	135.5
Spoken <i>ICE-K</i>	20.7	48.3	31.1	200.2
<i>GloWbE-KE</i>	28.8	23.4	22.2	20.4

Table 1 shows that in *AGoW*, the definite-article variant consistently occurred much less frequently than its possessive-determiner counterpart (that is 34 vs 125 and 57 vs 319), regardless of whether the noun used was *father* or *mother*. The picture is partially different in written *ICE-K*: while the definite-article variant *the father* was less frequently used than its possessive-determiner counterpart *his father* (that is 24.9 vs 55.3), the variant *the mother* was much more frequently used than its counterpart *his mother* (135.5 vs 44.2). (It is intriguing why the choice of either *mother* or *father* mattered significantly.) In spoken *ICE-K*, the picture becomes consistent again, but this time round the definite-article variant consistently occurred more frequently than its possessive-determiner counterpart (that is 48.3 vs 20.7 and 200.2 vs 31.1). Finally, in *GloWbE-KE*, the picture is also consistent, but in the opposite direction: in both cases the definite-article variant occurs less frequently than its possessive-determiner counterpart, although the differences between the respective figures (namely 23.4 vs 28.8 and 20.4 vs 22.2) are most likely not statistically significant.

One overall observation that emerges from **Table 1** is that the frequencies for both variants are lower in *GloWbE-KE* than they are in all the other three data sources, except for one comparison slot (that in the case of *his father* when *GloWbE-KE* is compared to spoken *ICE-K*). Besides, not only are they lower, they are also, as already suggested, seemingly not statistically significant. From this double difference it could be claimed that despite *GloWbE-KE* being by far the largest of all the data sources considered, it is the least representative of KenE usage. And it seems to be so for the following reasons: first, in relation to both *AGoW* and written *ICE-K*, *GloWbE-KE* is composed of numerous, but only online texts, ‘[a]bout 60 percent of [which] come from informal blogs, whereas the other 40 percent come from a wide variety of (often) more formal genres and text types’ (Davies & Fuchs, 2015: 4). Second, in relation to spoken *ICE-K*, *GloWbE-KE* is obviously different from it since it is all written while the other is all spoken. To this extent, it is puzzling that *GloWbE-KE* should contain much fewer instances of the definite-article structure (23.4 pmw for *the father* and 22.2 pmw for *the mother*) than spoken *ICE-K* (48.3 for *the father* and 200.2 pmw for *the mother*). One should expect any written corpus (even if it were composed of informal material) to contain fewer definite-article variants than any spoken corpus, since *the father* and *the mother* are assumed to be less international-English-like than *his father* and *his mother* in the logic of the present study. But while some of the frequencies of the two variants may seem to be puzzling, others do not: for example, the very high frequency (200.2 pmw) for the definite-article variant *the mother* (vs. only 31.1 pmw for *his mother*) is most likely attributable to the spoken nature of spoken *ICE-K*.

Another overall observation from **Table 1** is that the frequencies for the possessive-determiner variants *his father* (125 pmw) and *his mother* (319 pmw) are much higher for *AGoW* than for any other data source. Such variation can easily be attributed to the written and edited nature of the

novel. But it could also be explained from a different, diachronic perspective, in the following way: when the book was written in the mid-1960s, KenE was still in its first decade of its 'nativization' phase (to make reference to Schneider's (2003, 2007) Dynamic Model for the development of New Englishes), according to e.g. Hoffmann (2010: 290), who suggests that this stage started from the 'late 1940s'. So, it could be argued that some of the structures that can today be called stable KenE features were just nascent then.⁵ And much as authors such as Schneider (2007: 196) and Hoffmann (2021: 26) maintain that KenE is still in its nativisation phase, it is only reasonable to assume that each passing decade (three decades later, i.e. in the early-to-mid-1990s, in the case of ICE-K and, five decades later, i.e. in the early 2010s in the case of GloWbE-KE) entrenched the definite-article variant (*the father/the mother*) as a KenE feature.

3.4 Individual variation in the use of the for possessive determiners

The variation in the use of *the* for possessive determiners observed across ICE-K, GloWbE-KE and AGoW was attributed to 'macro' factors: medium (spoken vs written) and text type (informal blogs vs. formal texts). But, beyond this variation, it can assertively be re-stated from the frequencies reported in Table 1, with the lowest frequency being as high as 20.4 pmw⁶, that both the possessive determiners and *the* are used as variants for the same grammatical meaning, 'possession'. Arguably, though, more illuminating, in terms of really establishing the extent to which the use of *the* for *his/her/their/its* is entrenched in KenE usage, is to study the extent to which individual KenE speakers use both variants, and whether they use them in systematic or free variation, to borrow terminology from interlanguage variability studies (see e.g. Ellis, 1999, 2015). 'Systematic' variation would mean that the choice of *the* over *his/her/their/its* is dependent on linguistic, sociolinguistic, or psycholinguistic factors (Ellis, 1999: 464).

To illustrate this variability within an individual's production, four cases extracted from our data sources will be analysed. The first extract, in (27), is an excerpt from AGoW (p. 201), the only paragraph in the book where both *his father* and *the father* are used:

(27) *But unexpectedly the day arrived. Muhoya, a young man newly circumcised, had come home and found his father at his favourite game. Suddenly the young man felt the moment had come. 'If you value your life,' he cried, 'don't touch her again.' At first the father was so surprised that his hand became numb in the air. Had he heard aright? He fell into a lion's rage. He lifted his hand to strike the boy, but Muhoya caught his father by the arm. The years of hatred and fear made him delirious with a fearful joy. Father and son were locked in a life-and-death struggle. The son did not see a father, but a perpetrator of unprovoked violence, a petty colonial tyrant who would extort money from even his closest relatives. And his father saw not a son, but a subject who had refused to be a subject. (p. 201)*

In this extract it would be hard to attribute the single occurrence of *the father* to a predictable linguistic context. This cannot be its syntactic position (almost) at the beginning of a sentence, nor can it be its function as a subject, both of which it shares with *his father* in the last sentence. It is equally hard to see why where *the father* was used its counterpart *his father* should not have been used, instead. Furthermore, in the third occurrence of *his father* (in the last sentence), one can argue that *the father* should have been used instead of *his father*, to contrast with *the son* in the preceding sentence. All in all, it would be reasonable to conclude that the author used both *his father* and *the father* in free variation, though the former more frequently than the latter.

The second case, in (28), is an extract from written ICE-K, by author W2F017K. The passage comes from a published short story.

(28) *Several times I found Gachara in a foul mood. He had told me his father had started the wrestling game after which he had pinned him down with the legs resting one on his head and the other on his shoulders. [. . .] It happened on a Saturday afternoon as we all sat having some tea. Gachara was sitting with the baby on the floor when the father casually moved and sat on the chair next to the two. they were so busy playing that Gachara did not notice his father approaching.*

In this extract, as in that in (27), it would also be difficult to argue that *the father*, rather than *his father*, was used because of the linguistic context around it. Of relevance is the fact that *the father*, like *his father* used before it, is a subject in a dependent clause.

The third case, from GloWbE-KE, appears in (29).

(29) *As for those from the immigrant Asian and European communities, it was felt that the longer they had been settled there, the greater would be their sense of attachment to the land and its people and so those of them who were, at the least, second generation born, whether through the father or the mother, were put on the same footing as their African compatriots. (awaazmagazine.com)*

What is notable in (29) is the use of two successive definite-article structures, *the father* and *the mother*, and then a possessive-determiner one, *their African compatriots*. One wonders why the author, after writing *through the father or the mother*, did not continue to use the article *the*, and, thus, write *through the African compatriots*. Here there seems to be a case of an identifiable linguistic context, because, in (29), unlike in (27) and (28), the noun *father* contrasts with *compatriot*, which is not a kinship term. Based on this case, and on the fact that in 84% of its 43 occurrences highlighted in bold type in examples (1) to (23), *the* appears before the kinship terms *father*, *mother*, *son*, *daughter*, *brother*, *sister*, *wife*, and *husband*, it can be concluded that the use of the definite article for possessive determiners is predictable before kinship terms. In this case we can say that the

variability in the use of *the* for possessive determiners is systematic.

The fourth illustrative case is an entire 1743-words-long ‘monologue’ by speaker S2B021K in spoken ICE-K. It is one of the ‘broadcast talk’ texts (see Hudson-Ettle & Schmied, 1999: 18). (Note in passing that example (4) was extracted from the same text.) Summary information on the frequencies of occurrence of different kinship terms in this monologue will be enough to make the point: *the mother*: 20; *the father*: 7; *his father*: 0; *her father*: 0; *his mother*: 0; *her mother*: 0; *this mother*: 5; *her husband*: 1; *the husband*: 3. Clearly, for the speaker in this case the figures are unambiguous: 0 frequencies for the possessive-determiner variants *his mother*, *his father*, *her father* and *her mother*, against 20 for *the mother* and 7 for *the father*. In fact, one would have been tempted to conclude that this speaker (who is a female) does not have the possessive-determiner option in her idiolect at all, if it were not for the sole occurrence of *her husband*. Still, her case is strong evidence of how entrenched the use of *the* for possessive determiners is for some KenE speakers: for her, hardly can we talk of the two structures being variants of each other. But if we were to do so, we would conclude that the use of *her husband* was random, and, then, that the author used the two variants in free variation, although with the definite-article being by far the more frequent.

It transpires from the four illustrative cases that individual variation in KenE usage of *the* for possessive determiners is both systematic and free: *systematic* in relation to the semantic field of the noun (whether a kinship or non-kinship term) to take either *the* or a possessive, and *free* in relation to using either *the* or a possessive before kinship terms.⁷ However, discussion of the fourth illustrative case shows that this free variation masks an uneven distribution of the two variants, with the definite article being the more likely of the two. This reinforces the suggestion made earlier that there seems to be strong collocation between the definite article and kinship terms in KenE usage. Here is further illustration:

- (30) a) *Jane came with the father*
b) *Jane came in the car*

While *the father* in (a) automatically means ‘Jane’s father’, *the car* does not (automatically) mean ‘Jane’s car’. In fact, it is highly unlikely that KenE speakers would simply say *Jane came in the car* without specifying whose car it was.

This apparent collocation between just an article and a noun is rather unusual because English collocations typically involve lexical words: verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs (see O’Dell & McCarthy, 2008: 10). Still, it seems that from one generation of KenE speakers to another, phrases like *the father* and *the mother* have been transmitted as ‘formulaic sequences’ (Keck & Kim, 2014), of the kind of ‘constructions’ described in Hoffmann (2021). And in the way those phrases have been stored in their users’ brains, *the* typically means *his/her/their/its*, as further illustrated by (31):

- (31) a) *Andrew came with the mother.*

- b) *?I came with the mother.*

In (a) *the mother* automatically means ‘Andrew’s mother’ while it does not in (b), where *my mother*, not *the mother*, is actually expected in KenE. This association of third person with *the* can be considered another aspect of systematic variability. In this regard, it is instructive to note that none of the uses of *the father/the mother* identified in examples (1) to (23) has a first-person or a second-person reference. The phrases *my mother/my father* and *your mother/your father* appear on their own in the respective sources. (For example, in AGoW there are 21 occurrences of *my mother*, 5 of *my father*, 5 of *your mother*, and 3 of *your father*.)

4 Conclusion

The present study investigated the frequent use of the definite article *the* for possessive determiners in KenE, as in *I met Mary and the mother*. Based on data mainly from three sources, namely two corpora (ICE-K and GloWbE-KE) and a novel (*A Grain of Wheat*), the study concluded that both *the* and possessive determiners were used as variants for the same grammatical meaning, ‘possession’. The frequencies of occurrence for the two were compared across the three sources and the differences between them were attributed to the different types of texts in which those sources were produced: whether these were written or spoken, or whether edited or non-edited. Beyond such text-type differences, though, an analysis of individual case studies indicated that the two variants are used in both systematic and free variation in KenE: a) systematic to the extent that *the* definite article is predictable before kinship terms with third-person reference (eg. *his/her mother*); b) free to the extent that before a given kinship term there is no specific context from which it can be predicted whether or not it is either *the* or a possessive determiner that is going to be used, even though *the* is the more likely of the two. In fact, for some KenE speakers the definite-article option seems to be the only one available. It would be interesting in further research to establish who these speakers are, particularly in terms of social variables such as gender and age.

Notes

1 *A Grain of Wheat* was first published by East African Educational Publishers but was later published (with added material) by other publishers as well, leading to a different pagination.

2 We are deliberately excluding the possibility of *the father* referring to a priest in the Catholic church.

3 The following phrases containing either *mother* or *father* were excluded from the count: *the mothers*, *the mother of*, *the fathers*, *the father of*, *God/Almighty the Father*. They cannot take a possessive determiner and keep the meaning of ‘parent of sb’ at the same time.

4 The full written component of ICE-K has two sub-components: one that is 401,863 words long and another one that is 100,207 words long (see Hudson-Ettle & Schmied, 1999: 60–62). This latter is labelled ‘written as spoken texts’ and, because of its partly spoken and partly written nature, it will not be considered in this study. Moreover, from the 401,863 words of the larger component will be excluded 40,139 words for the ‘non-professional writing’ segment, specifically composed of ‘student untimely essays’ and ‘student examination essays’ (Hudson-Ettle & Schmied, 1999: 62). This leaves us with 361,724 of writing that

was by and large edited, since the bulk of this (300,860) is printed material.

5 Indeed, the use of *the* for possessive determiners is not one of the very many individual structures identified by Hocking (1974) as being 'common mistakes' in East African (and, hence, Kenyan) English.

6 To put things into perspective, Biber et al. (1999: 442) label some two-word combinations with 'over ten occurrences per million words' as 'relatively common', and label some phrases 'occurring over 20 times per million words' as 'common' (p. 459).

7 The very suggestion that free variation exists in an established post-colonial variety like KenE runs counter to the claim made by interlanguage variability scholars that '[f]ree variation gives way to systematic variation' (Ellis, 2015: 10) over time.

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