

Language Contact and Microvariation in the domain of Nominal Determination: The Expression of Indefiniteness in Piacentine and Ferrarese dialects

The variation in the nominal determination available to Italian and Italo-Romance varieties to express indefiniteness has recently attracted the attention of syntacticians working on Romance. The Italian peninsula is a flourishing ground for the analysis of nominal determination in the context of indefiniteness since Italian and Italo-Romance varieties have a great amount of indefinite determiners at their disposal. The main four available forms are: (i) the ZERO determiner (i.e., bare nominals); (ii) the definite article in indefinite interpretation (ART); (iii) the bare determiner *di* (only found in some northern Italian dialects and unavailable in non-dislocated position in standard Italian); (iv) the “partitive determiner” (*di*+ART), which combines *di* with the morphology of the definite article (Cardinaletti & Giusti, 2018). Emilia-Romagna is a region of extreme interest in this respect as it represents a crossroad between the tendency of *di* (a Gallo-Romance innovation spreading from France cross the border with Piedmont) and that of ART, giving rise to a predominant use of *di*+ART.

Despite recent work has attempted to set the ground for an in-depth study of Italo-Romance varieties, the micro-comparative approach among closely related dialects is still in its infancy. The present study aims to compare two Gallo-Italic varieties (Pellegrini, 1977) spoken in Emilian-Romagna but located at the opposite borders of the region, namely Piacentine (westmost variety) and Ferrarese (eastmost variety). The two varieties are compared with respect to (i) the array of available indefinite determiners, (ii) the semantic properties of these determiners, and (iii) the influence of language contact on nominal determination.

Data collection was carried out through an online questionnaire submitted to 43 native adult speakers of Ferrarese dialect and 30 native adult speakers of Piacentino dialect. Both questionnaires consisted of a battery of sociodemographic questions and a Forced-Choice task with acceptability judgements. The stimuli investigated the choice of indefinite determiners in object position of negative sentences depending on the noun type (mass vs. plural count) (1)-(2)), the event type (habitual vs. episodic) (3)-(4), and the clitic type in Clitic Left Dislocation (accusative vs. partitive) (5)-(6). The variants investigated are: (i) the ZERO determiner (i.e., bare nominals); (ii) the definite article in indefinite interpretation (ART); (iii) the bare determiner *di* (only found in some northern Italian dialects and unavailable in non-dislocated position in standard Italian); (iv) the “partitive determiner” (*di*+ART), which combines *di* with the morphology of the definite article. The Piacentine and Ferrarese data were analysed separately through Conditional Inference Trees and Random Forests (Tagliamonte & Baayen 2012).

- (1) a. A mangi mia \emptyset / la / ad / dla chèran. [Piacentine]
 I eat NEG ZERO ART *di* *di*+ART meat
 b. A mangi mia \emptyset / al / ad / dal patèti.
 I eat NEG ZERO ART *di* *di*+ART potatoes
 ‘I don’t eat meat / I don’t eat potatoes’
- (2) a. Ason vegetarian. An magn brisa \emptyset / la / *ad / dla caran. [Ferrarese]
 I am vegetarian. I-not eat NEG ZERO ART *di* *di*+ART meat
 ‘I am vegetarian. I don’t eat meat.’
 b. Ad solit, an magn brisa \emptyset / i / *ad / di zuchìn.
 usually I-not eat NEG ZERO ART *di* *di*+ART courgettes
 ‘I usually don’t eat courgettes.’
- (3) a. Asum astemi. A bev mia \emptyset / al / ad / dal vein. [Piacentine]
 I am teetotaler I drink NEG ZERO ART *di* *di*+ART wine
 ‘I am a teetotaler. I don’t drink wine.’
 b. Iar sira um mangè \emptyset / la / ad / dla chèran.
 yesterday evening (we)have eaten ZERO ART *di* *di*+ART meat
 ‘Yesterday evening we ate meat.’

- (4) a. *ler sira, an ho brisa magnà Ø / la /*ad/ dla caran.* [Ferrarese]
 yesterday evening I-not have NEG eaten ZERO ART *di di+ART* meat
 ‘Yesterday evening I didn’t eat meat.’
- b. *ler sira, an ho brisa vandu Ø / i / *ad/ di zuchin.*
 yesterday evening I-not have NEG sold ZERO ART *di di+ART* courgettes
 ‘Yesterday evening I didn’t sell courgettes.’
- (5) a. *Di / Ad / Ø fiur, i ho töt.* [Piacentine]
di di+ART ZERO flowers them.CL.ACC (I)have bought
- b. *Di / Ad / Ø fiur, n’ ho töt.*
di di+ART ZERO flowers NE (I)have bought
 ‘Flowers, I bought.’
- (6) a. *ler matina, Ø / i / *ad/ di funz an i ho brisa*
 yesterday morning ZERO ART *di di+ART* mushrooms I-not them.CL.ACC (I)have NEG
cujést [Ferrarese]
 harvested
- b. *ler matina, Ø / i / *ad/ di funz an n’ ho brisa kujèst*
 yesterday morning ZERO ART *di di+ART* mushrooms I-not NE (I)have NEG harvested
 ‘I haven’t harvested mushrooms yesterday morning.’

The collected data show that this westmost variety (i.e., Piacentine) has at its disposal all the four determiners, whereas the eastmost variety (i.e., Ferrarese) lacks bare *di*, which is the unmarked form for expressing non-existential indefiniteness in Piacentine (in the scope of negation). The results also show that in both Piacentine and Ferrarese ART and *di+ART* are in free competition with mass vs plural count nouns and generic vs episodic sentences. As for ZERO, its frequency of use is low in both languages. However, the Piacentine ZERO is extremely marginal and behaves more like bare *di*, while its Ferrarese counterpart is acceptable independent on noun type and sentence type. As for left-dislocated DPs, in both varieties we notice that: (i) bare *di* and ZERO take narrow scope and are resumed by the quantitative clitic *ne*; (ii) ART and *di+ART* can have both wide and narrow scope interpretation and can be resumed both by the quantitative clitic *ne* (i.e., with narrow scope interpretation), and by the accusative clitic *li* (i.e., taking wide scope), with a preference for the former resumption (in analogy with French but contrary to Italian which bans *ne*-resumption of *di+ART*).

This study has shown that the two varieties share properties that stem both from the common Celtic *substratum* (Ascoli, 1861) and from closed contact with the standard language, whose use across the Italian peninsula expanded to informal communication spheres (Berruto, 1987, 1989). On the one hand, *di+ART* in Piacentine and Ferrarese seems to be halfway between Italian and French relative to its distribution and semantic properties (examples of Italian and French will be given in the paper for reasons of space). On the other hand, the preservation of ZERO in both varieties is due to the influence of Italian, which can be presumably characterized in terms of *contact-induced stability* (cf. Cerruti & Regis, 2020 for a similar outcome in Piedmontese). Despite these similarities, Piacentine preserved bare *di* thanks to contact with other Gallo-Italic varieties (such as Piedmontese, Ligurian, and Lombard) while Ferrarese lost this hallmark probably because of contact with Rodigino, the neighbouring Venetian variety which lacks *di* but makes a wide use of ZERO. Therefore, our results also show that the array of available determiners may vary even among typologically close varieties. As a concluding remark, we will discuss the “vulnerability” of the domain of nominal determination. Despite its functional nature (with the primary function of assigning reference), this component of grammar is subject to change and microvariation as an effect of language contact, which plays a crucial role in influencing the distribution and the semantics of determiners.

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