

What do you have to spell out if you lost number marking on nouns? A comparative view on Romance indefinite determiners

In this talk, we take up long lasting discussions of potential correlations inside Romance languages and varieties between number marking and indefinite determination (Stark 2006, Carlier 2007), add some new data from lesser-known Romance languages (Gerards/Stark 2020; as well as typologically remote languages, Kouneli 2021) and propose a derivational model which correlates the availability and type of number morphology to the respective systems of indefinite nominal determiners. Definite determination concerns, in the default case, the identifiability of the intended referent by maximality (uniqueness, Russell 1905; Hawkins 1978, Lyons 1999 for a general overview), i.e. the properties of the respective referent are less relevant than its identity or uniqueness in the concrete situational context in order to successfully communicate. Indefinite determiners, however, introduce referents or allow non-maximality, and therefore, the adequate encoding of grammatically and ontologically relevant properties such as mass vs. count in the nominal expression become central (Stark 2008, Cowper/Hall 2012).

One central element in the encoding of the mass-count distinction is a dedicated morpheme to express morphological number (see a.m.o. Borer 2005), like Engl. *-s*, besides explicit classifiers or nominal determiners such as the ‘partitive article’, a mass classifier available in many, though by far not all Romance languages:

- (1) a. *Compro vin.* (Sp; ‘I buy wine’)
b. *Compro (unos) vines.* (Sp; ‘I buy (some good) wines’)
- (2) a. *J’achète **du**_{M.SG.} vin.* [vɛ̃] (Fr; ‘I buy wine’)
b. *J’achète **des**_{PL.} vins.* [pɛ̃] (Fr; ‘I buy (some good) wines’)

As French in its oral realization and contrary to Spanish lost number marking many centuries ago, and the grammaticalization of an indefinite determiner (derived from Latin *DE*, ‘from’, and *ILLE*, ‘that’) can be seen as the evident compensation to minimally mark singular and plural number in indefinites. This explanation turns out, however, to be too general, as many Italian varieties, though preserving (vocalic) number marking on nouns, also display a ‘partitive article’ (Pinzin/Poletto 2022). Francoprovençal, an endangered Gallo-Romance variety spoken in the region around Lyon, France, in the canton Valais in Switzerland and in the Aosta Valley in Italy (Kristol 2016), possesses ‘partitive articles’, in some varieties, next to invariable (and thereby uninflected) *DE* (Stark/Gerards 2020), which yields in some cases/declension classes nominal expressions without any number marking:

(3)	<i>la</i>	<i>da</i>	<i>laci:</i>	<i>dã</i>	<i>lø</i>	<i>fr’igœ</i>
	there is	DE	milk	in	the	fridge

‘There is milk in the fridge; you can take some, if you want.’

A fine-grained analysis locating the phi-features GENDER and NUMBER and their agreement patterns in the functional spine of nominal expressions will show where (and why) ‘partitive articles’ are inserted into the structure, explain their complementary distribution with sigmatic (but not vocalic) plural marking in Romance and try to explain the existence and restricted distribution of nominal expressions without any number marking in Francoprovençal (something which is typologically unexpected in Romance). The main assumption concerns the relevance of functional heads very low in the functional spine of nominals and their interplay with overt determiners.

References

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