

How definite is the definite article in (Italo-)Romance? A diatopic and diachronic perspective

All Romance languages are article-languages that have developed from article-less Latin. The form and value of the definite and indefinite articles are apparently homogeneous. Romance developed the indefinite singular article for count nouns from cardinal *unus* 'one' (1) and, apart from few exceptions, the definite article (2) from the discourse anaphoric demonstrative *ille* 'that'. This is not surprising, as it is generally noted that these two elements are the source of the formation of new determiners cross-linguistically. Examples are in Italian, but they could be reproduced in all Romance languages:

- (1) Ho mangiato una mela / la mela. ('I ate an apple / the apple')

A second common trait is the use of the definite article to signal reference to kind, as is possible in the object of verbs expressing (dis)like (cf. Laca 1990 for Spanish and English, Anscombe 2001 for French):

- (2) Adoro *(le) mele / *(la) carne. ('I love [the] apples / meat')

A third quasi-common trait of Romance (with the exception of French) is to have maintained lack of article to express narrow scope indefiniteness in plural count and singular mass nouns (*mele* / *cioccolata*).

- (3) Ho mangiato mele / carne. ('I ate apples / meat')
(4) J'ai mangé des pommes / de la viande. ('I ate [of-the] apples / meat')

Most of the languages that allow for bare nominals also have an overt indefinite determiner at least with count plural nouns. The divide across Romance languages are between those that pluralize 'one' (Ibero-Romance and Eastern Romance) and Italian and Gallo-Romance varieties, where the partitive article coexists with bare nouns.

Cardinaletti and Giusti (2016, 2018, 2020) note that in some contexts the definite article can introduce indefinite nominal expressions thereby observing three possible realizations for narrow scope indefinites, which have a different diatopic distribution across Italian dialects and are all available in the colloquial standard with different rates of preferences only partially mirroring the preferences found in the dialects:

- (5) a. Ieri abbiamo mangiato mele / carne. ('Yesterday, we eat apples')
b. Ieri abbiamo mangiato delle mele / della carne. ('Yesterday, we eat [of-the] apples')
c. Ieri abbiamo mangiato i biscotti / la carne. ('Yesterday, we eat [the] apples')

Note that definite article in (5c) cannot be reduced to a case of weak definiteness because it is not possible with a singular count noun (6a), while weak indefinites generally are (6b-c):

- (6) a. #Ieri ho mangiato il biscotto. ('Yesterday, I ate the apple', only definite)
b. Ieri ho comprato la macchina. ('Yesterday, I bought the car', intending: a car)
c. Ieri ho conosciuto la vicina di un mio amico. ('Yesterday, I met the neighbour of a friend of mine')

The apparent definite article in indefinite nominal expressions (5b-c), weak indefinites (6b-c) and kind-referring nominals (2) has been unified in different ways in formal semantics, advocating weakening of the presupposition of existence (Roberts 2003, Zamparelli 2002, Donazzan 2013, Leonetti 2019). I will approach the issue from the opposite side, proposing with Carlson and Sussman (2005) that we are dealing with different (silent) determiners in Spec DP concurring with a free morpheme realizing nominal features in D.

Appropriate diagnostics will be presented to distinguish across these indefinite determiners, capturing the cross-Romance variation, which is particularly rich across Italo-Romance varieties.

The proposal will elaborate on Giusti (2002, 2015) and treat the article as a free functional morpheme decoding a bundle of nominal features including (abstract) Case, Number, and Gender in the highest head of the nominal spine. Such a morpheme is combined with a determiner in its specifier, which is solely responsible for the interpretation of the nominal expression. The diatopic and diachronic variation will be captured by nano-parametric variation (in the sense of Biberauer and Roberts 2012) associated to the different weak determiners.

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