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The indefinite article - Indefinite? - Article?

The (not uncommon) view whereby the indefinite article (IA) is a direct counterpart of the definite article (DA) and both of category D is mistaken (cf. Perlmutter, 1970; Kayne, 1994). In many languages the IA is related to the numeral 'one', whereas the DA has no such relation to numerals. Secondly, they have (e.g. in German) distinct inflectional paradigms. Third, in Zürich German they exhibit opposite behavior vis-a-vis strong adjectival agreement, in that the DA in (1a) only exhibits adjectival agreement if an adjective follows it, while the IA in (1b) loses its agreement in the presence of an adjective (Weber, 1964, p.107):

(1)   a. d-(i   rot) rosä   b. e-s   chind / e liäb-s   chind   Zürich
          the-AGRA red rose   a-AGRA child / a good-AGRA child

In fact, the notion of *indefinite article* is doubly misleading, since it is neither indefinite nor an article. But just what is it? I show that the IA is the morphosyntactic reflex of derivations that involve noun phrase internal movement of certain quantificational or deictic elements (in part akin to Bennis et al. (1998)).

Consider German *ein*. It can immediately precede a noun (2a). It can itself be preceded by a number of elements, call them OP^{IA}, including wh-elements (2b,c), negative (2d), and possessor elements (3a,b).

(2)   a. ein Auto   b. welch ein Auto   c. was für ein Auto   d. k-ein Auto   Ger
          a   car   what a   car   what for a   car   no   car

OP^{IA} can sanction definiteness (3a), and plural (3b,c). In fact, OP^{IA} seems to dictate much of the interpretation of the noun phrase with regard to illocution, quantification, and reference. Given this, I propose that the SynSem properties traditionally associated with *ein* should really be attributed to a zero OP^{IA} (3d).

(3)   a. m-ein Auto   b. m-ein-e Autos   c. k-ein-e Autos   d. Ø ein Auto   Ger
          my   car   my   cars   no   cars   'a car'

Hence the IA itself is neither indefinite, nor singular (Bennis et al., 1998). I argue next that it is an attractor, i.e. the set of OP^{IA} (which is subject to parametrization) moves to Spec,IA. This is an aspect of (4a,b) (Hendrick, 1990), and suggested by Swiss dative *əm* (5a), versus *ər* (5b).

(4)   a. $[_{DegP}$too big] a t_{DegP} car   b. $[_{DegP}$how long] an t_{DegP} essay

(5)   a. uf əm   ən t_m ä   bärg   b. uf ən ər   ä   rosä   Swiss
          on DAT.MAS IA   INFL mountain   on IA DAT.FEM INFL rose

Arguments that (2b,c,d) and (3a) (cf. Corver (2004)) involve such movement will be presented at the talk. (6), where the NPs in both coordinates receive a count interpretation, yet the IA is not coordinated, is immediately accounted for, assuming zero OP^{IA} ATB-movement. Thinking of Kayne's (2009) related proposal

(6)   öper   uf OP ən [t_{op} əs   piärli]   odr [(*ən) t_{op} əs   wiili]   iiladä   Swiss
          someone to   IA   INFL beer.DIM or   IA   INFL wine.DIM treat
          'to treat someone to a drink of beer or a drink of wine'

that (other) numerals ('two, three …') move into Spec,IA (leaving IA unpronounced), we are close to understanding the contrast in e.g. Basque and Hebrew, between post-nominal 'one' and pre-nominal other numerals, in a way that recalls Bulgarian definiteness marking in non-modified versus modified DPs.

In sum, the "indefinite article" is not an indefinite article but a (sometimes non-overt) head that attracts a certain class of quantificational or deictic elements (OP^{IA}) into its Spec, including a zero OP with the semantics of the "indefinite article."

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