

The rise of the ‘indefinite article’ in English

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All modern Germanic languages, among which Present-Day English, regularly use the ‘indefinite article’ before indefinite singular count nouns, with the exception of :

- (1) a. ✓ *Ég fann kött í garðinum* b. * I found cat in the garden
I found cat in garden-the ✓ I found a cat in the garden

Old English has the undesirable appearance of having a somewhat intermediate status, for one finds Icelandic-like constructions (cf. (2)a) as well as English-like constructions (cf. (2)b) with comparable frequencies:

- (2) a. *Men gesegon cuman fægre hand of heofonum*
people saw come fair hand from heaven (comart3,Mart_5_[Kotzor]:Ap11,A.6.548)
- b. *Him þa to com an fiscere*
him then to came a fisher (coorosiu,Or_2:5.48.13.925)

In this paper, based on quantitative evidence collected on the YCOE, I sketch a full-fledged grammar for this ‘intermediate status’, and discuss how it developed into the modern situation.

I will first address the question of what the ‘indefinite article’ really is, and how one should characterize the difference between languages that have it (PDEnglish) and languages that don’t (Icelandic). On the basis of the observation that, in languages that have definite/indefinite oppositions, the latter interpretation comes for free (as the unmarked or default one), I will argue that the ‘indefinite article’ is misnamed, and that its role is not that of marking indefiniteness. I will then discuss the idea that it could be a classifier (Borer 2005) or a marker of countability (Ackles 1997, Crisma 1999): a crucial tenet for such hypotheses is that the count/mass distinction is not lexically encoded but syntactically derived. This assumption, however, faces at least two empirical problems: first, the existence, in the lexicon of some languages (English in (3)), of count/mass doublets that may correspond to a single lexical item in another (Hebrew in (3)):

- (3) *ʔaxalti* *xazir*
eat-PAST.1SG pig/pork
‘I ate pork/a pig’

Second, the fact that while the “Universal Sorter” (Bunt 1985) or “Universal Packager” (Jackendoff 1991) interpretation is generally very natural, the “Universal Grinder” (Pelletier and Schubert 1989) is clearly marked. These considerations support Rothstein’s (2010) approach to mass/count, namely that it is a *formal* distinction realized as a *lexical* property of nominal heads; further, it is not necessarily related to natural atomicity and it is projected all the way up to the DP level, so as to be accessible for grammatical operations outside the DP.

Based on this, I will propose an analysis of the ‘indefinite article’ that basically agrees with Borer’s in assuming that some languages allow for a ‘phonologically abstract’ element. Different from Borer, I will argue that the difference between Icelandic and PDEnglish lies in the different nature of this empty determiner:

- in Icelandic, the Ø determiner can value its features (long-distance-)agreeing with its goal in a

lower projection, without displacing it. Thus in Icelandic the \emptyset determiner is interpreted as singular count simply by virtue of its agreeing with the lower projection hosting the Number feature, hence it is compatible also with singular count nouns.

- in PDEnglish, the \emptyset determiner, when it does not overtly attract an appropriate goal to the Specifier position, receives a DEFAULT interpretation which in the case of the quantificational properties coincides with ‘unbounded’. The ‘indefinite article’, then, prevents the DP from receiving the DEFAULT ‘unbounded’ reading, incompatible with a singular count noun in all such languages.

From this single abstract parametric difference, a wider series of observable contrasts follow.

I will then show that Old English patterns with Icelandic with respect to some of these contrasts, hence I will propose that its grammar is one in which the \emptyset determiner is able to long-distance agree with its goal, exactly as in Icelandic. What makes Old English different from Icelandic, and determines its ‘intermediate status’, is the obligatory or optional expression of some informational features: specificity, existential presupposition and wide-scope-taking capabilities. Old English *an* (when it is not used as the numeral for 1) is then the equivalent of PDEnglish *a certain* (cf. (4)) or of Italian ‘partitive article’ (*albeit* singular instead of plural, cf. (5)):

(4) I eventually bought a (certain) book I had been looking for for weeks

- (5) a. Alla festa non ho invitato degli studenti
 at-the party not have-1sg invited of-the students
 ‘I did not invite some students to the party’ ambiguous: $\exists > \neg$ or $\neg > \exists$
- b. Alla festa non ho invitato studenti
 ‘I did not invite students to the party’ only $\neg > \exists$

I will show that the various Old English texts in the YCOE differ in the obligatory or optional expression *an* in these contexts, obligatoriness being more common in later texts. The progressive extension contexts requiring *an* eventually led to a reanalysis of the \emptyset determiner as a DEFAULT determiner of the PDEnglish type.

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