

38. Indefinite Articles

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1. Defining the values

This map shows properties of indefinite articles. A morpheme is considered here to be an indefinite article if it accompanies a noun and signals that the noun phrase is pragmatically indefinite in the sense that it denotes something not known to the hearer, like the English word *a* in *a dog*. This includes the use of the numeral for ‘one’ as an indefinite article and affixes on nouns signalling indefiniteness.

@ 1.	Indefinite word distinct from numeral for ‘one’	91
@ 2.	Numeral for ‘one’ is used as indefinite article	90
@ 3.	Indefinite affix on noun	23

@ 4.	No indefinite article but definite article	89
@ 5.	Neither indefinite nor definite article	188
	total	473

The first type shown on the map includes languages with **an indefinite article that is distinct from the numeral for ‘one’**. This includes English, as well as Kobon (Madang, Trans-New Guinea; Papua New Guinea), illustrated in (1); compare the indefinite article *ap* with *añi*, the numeral for ‘one’ in Kobon.

(1) Kobon (Davies 1981: 61)

nibi *ap*

woman INDEF

‘a woman’

The second type shown involves **languages in which the numeral for ‘one’ is used as an indefinite article**. Many languages use the numeral for ‘one’ in contexts where

English would use an indefinite article. In some languages, this use of the numeral for ‘one’ is more or less obligatory as a marker of indefinite noun phrases, at least if they are singular. For instance, example (2) from German would be ungrammatical if the numeral for ‘one’ were left out.

(2) German (own data)

Ich habe einen Hund gekauft.

I have one dog bought

‘I bought a/one dog.’

In written German, (2) is vague or ambiguous as to whether it corresponds to the English sentence with *an* or the English sentence with *one*. In spoken German, these two senses are distinguished by stress: where English would use *one*, German would stress *ein(en)*. If the only difference in a language is one of stress, then the language is treated as a language in which the numeral for ‘one’ is used as an indefinite article. In some languages, there are additional phonological differences between the numeral and the indefinite article. For example, in Dutch, the

numeral *een* is pronounced with a full vowel [en], while the indefinite article is pronounced with a reduced vowel [ən]. While it is presumably the case that this was originally a single morpheme, which underwent greater phonetic reduction in certain contexts, it is assumed here that this difference has become lexicalized, so Dutch is treated here as a language in which the numeral and indefinite article are distinct. In some languages, the numeral appears in a different position in the noun phrase when it is functioning as an indefinite article. For example, in Turkish, the numeral for ‘one’ functions as an indefinite article, but has a different position within the noun phrase when serving that function: namely, it follows a prenominal adjective, in contrast to its use as a numeral, where it would precede an adjective (Kornfilt 1997: 275). Similarly, in Remo (Munda; India), the numeral *muy* ‘one’ precedes the noun when it is functioning as a numeral, but follows when it is functioning as an indefinite article, as in (3).

(3) Remo (Fernandez 1967: 127, 117)

a. *muy kaylabay gisiŋ*

b. *bire muy*

one	black	chicken	stone	a
'one black chicken'			'a stone'	

Limbu (Tibeto-Burman; Nepal) is similar to Remo in this respect (van Driem 1987: 32), while the reverse situation obtains in Pa'a (Chadic; Nigeria; Skinner 1979: 55): as a numeral the word for 'one' follows the noun, but as an indefinite article it precedes. Despite the difference in syntactic positions, these languages are coded here as languages in which the numeral for 'one' is used as an indefinite article.

While in languages like German the numeral is more or less obligatory as an indefinite article with singular noun phrases, in other languages the use is clearly optional: examination of two narrative texts in Lezgian (Daghestanian; Caucasus region of Russia and Azerbaijan) in Haspelmath (1993: 445-456) shows that of 17 instances where the English translations employ an indefinite article in a referential use, only 4 involve the numeral for 'one' in the Lezgian. Where the numeral as indefinite article is optional in a language, its use often appears to be conditioned at least in part by the discourse

prominence of the referent: when something is introduced for the first time and continues to be mentioned in the subsequent discourse, it is more likely to occur with the indefinite article on its first mention, while if something is mentioned only once in a discourse, it is more likely not to occur with the indefinite article (Givón 1981). The same contrast appears to be found in some languages in which the indefinite article is clearly distinct from the numeral for 'one' but still optional.

A language is treated here as a language in which the numeral for 'one' is used as an indefinite article if there is evidence that it is used in at least some situations where English would not use a numeral but would use the indefinite article. For many of the languages shown as using the numeral for 'one' as an indefinite article, this is not mentioned in the description but can be seen in texts. For example, Chelliah (1997) does not appear to mention the use of the numeral as an indefinite article in Meithei (Tibeto-Burman; northeast India), but most of the instances of pragmatically indefinite noun phrases functioning as subject or object in her texts occur with the numeral for 'one'. It is likely that there are other languages like this that are shown

on the map as lacking an indefinite article but where examination of texts would show otherwise.

The clearest instances of the numeral for ‘one’ being used as an indefinite article are in languages in which it can occur as a marker of indefiniteness in plural noun phrases, where the singularity inherent in the original meaning of ‘one’ is clearly absent. For example, in Lavukaleve (Solomons East Papuan family; Solomon Islands), the numeral for ‘one’ *ro* not only serves as an indefinite article in singular noun phrases, but also in plural noun phrases, and in the latter event takes plural inflection, as in (4).

(4) Lavukaleve (Terrill 2003: 80)

kanege rovo

family INDEF.PL

‘some families’

The third type shown on the map consists of languages with **indefinite affixes on nouns**, as in the example in (5) from Korowai (Awju-Dumut, Trans-New Guinea; Papua,

‘a donkey’

‘Bring a good camel.’

Such indefinite clitics are treated as separate words for the purposes of this map.

The fourth type shown on the map consists of **languages which do not have an indefinite article but do have a definite article**, by the criteria for defining definite articles discussed in chapter 37. An example of such a language is Kutenai (isolate; western North America). In (7), there is a definite article *ni?* with the noun *?a-kułak* ‘meat, but it is not obligatory on definite noun phrases: for example, in the absence of a definite article, *yički?mis* ‘pot’ in (7) can be interpreted as definite or indefinite.

(7) Kutenai (own data)

n²uquxaqanmuxu-ni yički?mi-s ni? ?a-kułak

IND=fall.into-IND pot-OBV the meat

‘The pieces of meat fell off into the/a pot’

The final type shown on the map consists of **languages which have neither an indefinite article nor a definite article**. An example of such a language is Polish: the unmarked noun *jabłko* ‘apple’ in (8) could be definite or indefinite depending on the context.

(8) Polish (Bielec 1998: 270)

Anna je jabłko.

Anna eat apple

‘Anna is eating the/an apple.’

As discussed in chapter 37, the criteria for definite articles include morphemes that signal specificity rather than definiteness: in some languages the morpheme treated in Map 37 as a definite article actually codes specificity, in that it occurs not only with definite noun phrases but also with indefinite specific noun phrases. In the same way, a morpheme that codes a noun phrase as being nonspecific (rather than indefinite) is treated on this map as an indefinite article. For example, the specific article *ta* in Futuna-Aniwa (Polynesian; Vanuatu) is

used both where English would use the definite article, and where English would use the indefinite article but where the speaker has a specific referent in mind, as in (9a); by contrast, the nonspecific article *sa* is used where the speaker has no particular referent in mind, as in (9b).

(9) Futuna-Aniwa (Dougherty 1983: 135, 23)

a. *na-n tukia ta fatu*

PST-1SG hit SPEC rock

‘I hit against a rock.’

b. *a roroveka kaseoitia ma*

ART Roroveka catch NEG

sa ika aratu

NONSPEC fish tomorrow

‘Roroveka won’t get any fish tomorrow.’

2. Geographical distribution

The features shown on this map do not show strong areal patterns. Languages with indefinite articles of some sort are

somewhat more common in (i) Europe; (ii) central and western Africa; (iii) an area in Asia stretching from the Middle East to Myanmar; (iv) the eastern part of New Guinea and the Pacific; and (v) Mexico and Central America. Languages lacking indefinite articles are widely distributed but are somewhat more common in (i) the Americas other than Mexico and Central America; (ii) Australia; and (iii) northern Asia.

Among the three types of indefinite articles shown on the map, languages in which the numeral for ‘one’ can serve as an indefinite article are widely scattered, while languages in which the indefinite article is distinct from the numeral for ‘one’ are somewhat more common in Africa and Europe. Languages with indefinite affixes are not common, but are widely scattered. They are more common in Africa than elsewhere in the world.

3. Theoretical issues

As discussed in §3 of chapter 88, there are some languages, like English, in which articles belong to a category of determiner with a particular position in the noun phrase, while other

languages lack such a category in the sense that definite articles and demonstratives occur in different positions in the noun phrase and can co-occur. Similar comments apply to indefinite articles, except that they rarely can co-occur with demonstratives, for semantic reasons. However, there are languages lacking definite articles in which the indefinite article appears in a different syntactic position within the noun phrase from demonstratives, showing that it does not form a category of determiner with demonstratives. For example, the indefinite article in Dongolese Nubian is a clitic that attaches to the last word in the noun phrase, as in (6) above; however, the demonstrative precedes the noun, as in (10).

(10) Dongolese Nubian (Armbruster 1960: 327)

máj ká

that house

‘that house’

In fact, there are languages with both a definite article and an indefinite article in which the two articles appear in different

positions in the noun phrase, thus apparently not forming a category in the language. For example, in Jul'hoan (Northern Khoisan; Namibia), the indefinite article follows the noun, while the definite article precedes the noun, as illustrated in (11): in (11a), the indefinite article *n/úí* follows the noun *jù* ‘person’, while in (11b), the definite article *//’à* precedes the noun *jù* ‘person’. (The noun *jù* ‘person’ in (11b) bears a suffix *-à* ‘relative, singular’ which is added to nouns when they occur with various sorts of modifiers, including relative clauses and the definite article, though not with the indefinite article.)

(11) Jul'hoan (Dickens 1992: 41)

a. *mí hoá jù n/úí ko !aòh*

1SG see person INDEF OBL yard

‘I saw a (certain) person in the yard.’

b. *//’à jù-à kú !aàh*

DEF person-REL.SG IMPF run

‘The person was running.’