

Why *on table* is *on the table*?

Notes on the definite article's incorporation with prepositions in Romanian

Alexandru Mardale

CNRS/LLF – Université Paris 7 & Universitatea din București

mardale@linguist.jussieu.fr

Goal: (i) examine the use of the definite article with prepositions in Romanian and Albanian; (ii) provide a morpho-syntactic analysis of article “drop”.

The data: definite article omission

In Romanian, language with a suffixal definite article, a non modified noun preceded by a preposition is necessarily used without the definite article (1). Conversely, when the noun is modified, it requires the definite article (2). Further evidence shows that this phenomenon is not sensitive to the position in which the PP occurs: preverbal subject in copular sentences (3), indirect object (4), the so-called “prepositional” direct object (5), complement of the noun (6), modifier (7). It is to be noted that, despite the omission of the article, these constructions have an obligatory referential and definite reading. The same phenomenon exists in Albanian (8), but not in other languages we have examined, e.g. French (9), Italian (10) or English (11).

The suffixal article: necessary or sufficient condition?

One question that arises when examining these data is whether the definite article omission takes place in all languages where it has a suffixal status. In other words, is suffixal status necessary and / or sufficient condition? A partial answer can be supplied if we look at Bulgarian (12), where the definite article, in spite of its suffixal status, always appears after the preposition. In fact, this can be seen as a necessary condition since the definite article does not fall in languages where it has a different status, i.e. proclitic (9)-(11) *supra*. An additional argument in favour of this view is that the Romanian indefinite article, which is proclitic, does not fall either (13). However, this does not seem to be a sufficient condition since we have seen that article omission is impossible with modification (2).

To sum up: the definite article omission in Romanian and Albanian is subject to two constraints: (i) the article's status and (ii) modification.

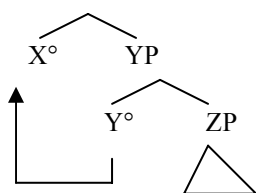
Given the facts presented so far, a number of issues have to be addressed: what is the licensing mechanism for the lack of the definite article with prepositions? Why are these constructions allowed in argument positions? Why must the definite article appear when the noun combines with a modifier? Why is the definite reading always permitted?

We suggest that the ability to appear in argument positions must be explained in terms of Case. This could be correlated with the fact that Romanian bare singulars cannot appear in argument positions (14). In order to be licensed in these positions, they must combine with an article (15). If we assume, following Grosu (1988) and Giusti (1993), that the article functions as Case (and implicitly that this is the licensing property for non prepositional arguments), on the one hand, and that the preposition is also a Case marker (Stowell (1981)), on the other hand, we are led to conclude that constructions we analyze here receive Case from two categories, whereas they are supposed to receive it only once (Chomsky (1981a)). Intuitively speaking, this is why the definite article “disappears” in P + NP constructions. On the contrary, when the construction is more complex (i.e. P + NP + modifier), the preposition is no longer able to assign Case to the hole construction, which is why the article must be overt. As for the definite reading of these constructions, even when the definite article is “dropped”, we will consider it as a special morphological property of the noun preceded by the preposition. In other words, in languages like Romanian, nouns can “absorb” the definite article in strict syntactic conditions without deleting its definite features.

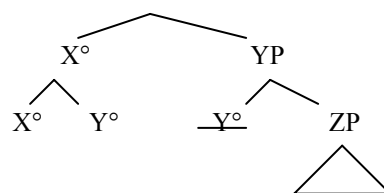
Analysis: we will use the morpho-syntactic mechanism of m-merger (Matushansky (2005)) to formalize the article “drop” with prepositions. This mechanism is defined for two heads in a particular configuration (16). It consists in the following two operations: (i) movement of the attracted head (i.e. the ‘weak’ one – here the suffixal article) to the attracting head (i.e. the ‘strong’ one – here the preposition) and (ii) m-merger. The result of m-merger is a single syntactic head which contains the features of both initial heads. M-merger cannot take place under modification since the attracted head must be overt in order to assign Case to the hole construction.

Examples

- (1) Mă îndrept către parc.
me head towards park ‘I head towards the park’
- (2) Mă îndrept către parcul cu copaci mari.
me head towards park-the with trees big-PL ‘I head towards the park with big trees’
- (3) Sub masă este un loc preferat de copii pentru a se acunde.
under table is a place preferred by children for to SE hide
‘Under the table is children’s favourite place to hide’
- (4) Am optat pentru preşedinte.
have opt for president ‘I opted for the president’
- (5) L-am văzut pe profesor.
him-have seen PE professor ‘I saw the professor’
- (6) (S-a procedat la) construirea de palate pentru rege.
(SE-has proceed to) construction-the of palaces for king
‘(It was proceeded to) the construction of palaces for the king’
- (7) Comoara a fost îngropată în grădină.
treasure-the has been buried in garden ‘The treasure has been buried in the garden’
- (8) a. Vuri librin mbi trapezë.
put book-the on table ‘He puts the book on the table’
b. Vuri librin mbi trapezën që bëri gjyshi.
put book-the on table-the that made grandfather
‘He puts the book on the table grandfather made’
- (9) Je me dirige vers le parc / vers le parc avec de grands arbres / vers le vieux parc.
- (10) Mi dirigo verso il giardino / verso il giardino con fiori.
- (11) We are heading towards the park / towards the park with big trees.
- (12) a. Otraviam se kam masata.
head me towards table-the ‘I head towards the table’
b. Otraviam se kam tservenata masa.
head me towards red-the table ‘I head towards the red table’
- (13) Mă îndrept către un parc.
me head towards a park ‘I head towards a park’
- (14) *A venit profesor. / *Am citit carte.
has came professor have red book
- (15) A venit profesorul. / Am citit cartea.
has came professor-the ‘The professor came’ have red book-the ‘We red the book’
- (16) a. XP b. XP



movement



m-merger

Selected references

Chomsky 1981a, Lectures on Government and Binding; Giusti 1993, La sintassi dei determinanti; Grosu 1988, On the Distribution of Genitives Phrases in Romanian; Longobardi 1994, Reference and Proper Names; Matushansky 2005, Moving a-Head; Stowell 1981, Elements of Phrase Structure.