

Istrian *uni/une*: the rise of an indefinite plural article?

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1. INTRODUCTION

The development of the indefinite marker for singular nouns from the numeral ‘one’ is well attested in a worldwide range of languages (Givón 1981). It is present in Romance too where some branches have maintained also the plural forms from Latin UNOS/-AS, mostly in Ibero-Romance (Ledgeway 2011: 409).

In Italo-Romance, plural *uni/une* are pronouns, and they never occur in attributive position (Loporcaro 2018: 75). They do, however, in Istriot and Istrovenetan, Romance dialects spoken in Istria (nowadays Croatia), as testified to by quantifier phrases such as *uni ociai* ‘a pair of spectacles’. For centuries these dialects has been in contact with Slavic varieties such as Croatian and Čakavian dialects (Tekavčić 1976) that have a quantifier originated from the plural form of the numeral ‘one’ (Croatian *jedni* M.PL/*jedne* F.PL, cf. Leko 2009: 25). In the light of these facts, the existence of plural indefinite quantifiers in Istriot and Istrovenetan is most likely an instance of pattern borrowing from Croatian such as *jedne naočale* ‘a pair of spectacles’.

2. GOALS AND METHODS

To the best of our knowledge, *uni/une* have never been investigated in the literature. We conducted a survey to observe how and to what extent contact with Croatian affects the paradigm (usually defective in Italo-Romance) of the indefinite forms *un/una* in Istriot and Istrovenetan.

We selected 24 concrete plural nouns, subdivided in 3 groups: (i) *pluralia tantum* (PT; *ociai* ‘spectacles’); (ii) plural dominant (PD; *calsini* ‘socks’); (iii) count plural (CP; *capoti* ‘coats’). Two pictures were created for each noun: in one picture the object representing the target noun was depicted once in the case of PT and twice in the case of PD and CP; in the second picture, the same object was replicated four times. In addition, each noun was included in three different phrases: definite plural article +N (*le braghe longhe* ‘the long trousers’); ‘a pair of’ +N (*un per de braghe longhe* ‘a pair of long trousers’); *uni/une* +N (*une braghe longhe*).

The first task aimed to elicit *uni/une* in the semi-spontaneous speech using pictures. In a second task, participants were asked to rate the phrases on a five-point Likert scale after looking at the picture. Data were analysed by means of conditional inference trees and random forest making use of the party package in R (Hothorn et al. 2006; Strobl et al. 2007; 2008; Tagliamonte & Baayen 2012).

3. RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

Participants spontaneously produced *uni/une* with PT and PD, preferably in response to pictures illustrating one pair of objects w.r.t. those illustrating more pairs, but not with CP. Phrases *uni/une* +N were rated lower overall than the other two types of phrase. Yet, they were accepted more in response to pictures illustrating one pair of objects than those illustrating more pairs, and with PT and PD than CP.

We found that, while informants still prefer to use the definite plural article or the equivalent of ‘a pair of’, the use of *uni/une* is nevertheless gaining ground; in particular, nouns occurring mostly in the plural in the source language are more likely to follow the Croatian pattern.

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