

How language dominance affects indefiniteness strategies in the syntax of Sicilian

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In this study we focus on the different strategies to express indefiniteness found in the central Sicilian dialect of Delia, by means of a small corpus of 1004 observations, to assess whether the index of linguistic dominance (Birdsong et al. 2012) is a good predictor in this respect.

The data: we collected data from 24 bilingual speakers of Italian and Deliano (12 M; 12 F; mean age: 36.37; age range: 19-72) who were asked to accomplish the following tasks: i) describe in Deliano a 3-minute videotape depicting an Italian speaking young woman during a shopping session at a supermarket (elicited production); ii) talk about their own shopping routines in Deliano, first in general and then during a specific past event (semi-spontaneous production). These activities were designed mainly to detect the following strategies to express indefiniteness: i) a definite article with an indefinite interpretation (ART in Cardinaletti & Giusti's 2018, 2020 terms) (cf. (1)); ii) a zero determiner for bare nouns (ZERO) (2); iii) the so-called "partitive article" (or DI+ART), frequent in Italian but not in Deliano, (3); iv) pseudo-partitives such as 'a bit of' (4); v) the grammaticalized cardinals 'two' (5), and 'four' (6):

- (1) *'Ncapu la mènzola cci su li libbra.*
on the shelf there are the books
'There are some books on the shelf.'
- (2) *Ø Libbra nun ni ljiggiu.*
books NEG NE read.PRS.1SG
'I don't read books.'
- (3) *Ppi -gghjiri a -ppigliari di la pasta.*
to go.INF to fetch.INF of the pasta
'In order to go and fetch some pasta.' [Nicola, 66 y.o, +20, semi-spontaneous production]
- (4) *Arsira accattavu tanticchia di murtatella.*
last-night buy.PST.1SG a-bit of mortadella
'I bought some mortadella last night.'
- (5) *Cugli du margariti e si nni jì.*
pick.PST.3SG two daisies and REFL NE go.PST.3SG
'He just picked a couple of daisies and left.'
- (6) *Ppi stasira ordinammu quattru panina.*
for tonight order.PRS.1PL four sandwiches
'We can have some sandwiches for tonight's dinner.'

The predictor: The index of linguistic dominance is taken from the Bilingual Language Profile (Birdsong et al. 2012), a tool of self-assessment that has been adapted for the linguistic scenario of Delia, characterized by bilectalism (cf. Rowe & Grohmann 2013). The index shows in what of the two varieties considered (A = Deliano, B = Italian), the speaker is more dominant. The score goes from -218 (total dominance of A) to +218 (total dom. of B), with 0 indicating a perfectly balanced bilingual. Our independent variable is the value of the index of dom. and our dependent variable is the probability on the basis of the distribution of usage in our study.

Results: Data analysis is visualized in Figure 1. There are three main results. The first result is related to the extremely minimized usage of DI + ART in both situations (0.5%; $z = -13.27$; $p < .00000001$). The second result is an overall preference for the production of sentences with ART (43.8%; $z = 121.34$, $p < .00000001$) over ZERO (26.2%; $z = 162.04$, $p < .00000001$), contrasted with a tendency for preferring ZERO (47.7%; $z = 23.89$, $p < .000001$) in our data collected for the extreme (-80) of our index of dominance. We do not find strong correlations between index of dominance and distributions. We possibly envisage effects of priming of the numerals with respect to grammaticalized cardinals (opposite weak correlations, $r = -0.27$ in the semi-spontaneous condition; $r = 0.28$ in the elicited condition).

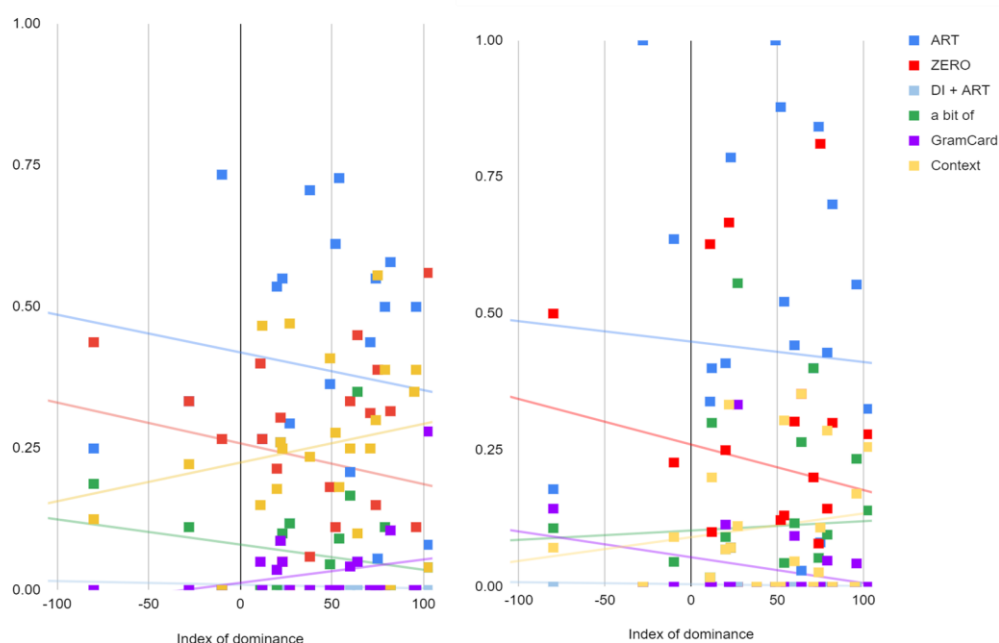


Figure 1: scatterplot of our results of elicited production (left panel) and semi-spontaneous production (right panel). GramCard = grammaticalized cardinals, context = cardinal numbers and quantifiers.

Conclusions and desiderata: Overall the index of linguistic dominance does not seem to be a good predictor of the strategy of indefiniteness expression, apart from the fact that high dominance of Italian does not imply a usage of DI+ART. However, the data collected do show a complex interaction between ART and ZERO that has to do with the linguistic dominance, but not necessarily in a statistically significant way. This suggests that dominance could depend on other factors to investigate in further research. Moreover, given the unsystematic nature of the data collected, different dedicated questionnaires are required, which can test i) in what context(s) ZERO is actually preferred to ART in Deliano, ii) the productivity of grammaticalized “four” and the division of labor with *nna puicu di* ‘a bit of’, iii) whether there is a priming effect of the numeral ‘four’ in the elicited production.

Selected references: Birdsong, D., Gertken, L.M., Amengual, M. (2012). *Bilingual Language Profile An Easy-to-Use Instrument to Assess Bilingualism*. COERLL, University of Texas at Austin. <https://sites.la.utexas.edu/bilingual/>. Cardinaletti, A. and G. Giusti. (2018). Indefinite Determiners: Variation and Optionality in Italo-Romance. In *Advances in Italian Dialectology*. Edited by Roberta D’Alessandro and Diego Pescarini. Amsterdam: Brill, pp. 135–161. Cardinaletti, A. and G. Giusti (2020). Indefinite Determiners in Informal Italian. A Preliminary Analysis. *Linguistics* 58 (3): 679–712. Rowe, C. and Grohmann, K.K. (2013). «Discrete Bilectalism: Towards Co-Overt Prestige and Di-Glossic Shift in Cyprus». *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 224, 119-42.