Francoprovençal partitive articles and where (and why) to find them

Jan Davatz
jan.davatz@uzh.ch

Background My PhD thesis will be part of the project called DiFuPaRo (“Distribution and Function of ‘Partitive articles’ in Romance”), which seeks to provide a detailed description of the spatial and functional distribution of the so-called ‘partitive articles’ (PAs), a typologically highly marked element found inside various Romance systems of nominal determination (cf. French du/des and Italian del/dei). The thesis focuses on Gallo-Romance varieties with a strong focus on Francoprovençal (FrPr), an endangered language spoken in Switzerland (in parts of the cantons of Valais and Fribourg), Northern Italy (Aosta Valley) and Eastern France (mainly Savoie and Haute-Savoie).

Introduction Although its form contains a definite article (cf. Carlier/Lamiroy 2014 for diachronic evolution), a PA introduces indefinite nominals (cf. Storto 2003, Cardinali/Giusti 2006, 2016, Carlier/Melis 2006, Hilgert 2010) with a particular interpretation in the singular, where it seems to ‘classify’ (cf. Herslund 1998) a nominal as mass. Morphologically, it has also a plural form, inflected for gender in Italian, but not in French (Fr. des; Ital. dei/degli/delle). This plural element, however, does not ‘classify’ refers as mass, but simply as indefinite and is thus not the (exact functional) plural equivalent of the singular. According to the literature (Kristol 2014, 2016), there are two types of FrPr to be distinguished when it comes to partitive articles: ‘Francoprovençal A’ in the north and west which shows a PA similar to the one in French (1a) and ‘Francoprovençal B’ in the south and east having only an invariable element de which inflects neither for number nor gender (1b):

(1)  

a. ë fam’i ʒ m’œdé sov’ ë d lə poˈlɛnta
in family one eats often PA polenta
‘In family we often eat polenta.’ (La Chapelle d’Abondance; Haute-Savoie, France)

b. ë ë ë ë səν’ e̞ də poˈlɛnta.
in family we eat often DE polenta
‘In family we often eat polenta.’ (Iséralves; Valais, Switzerland)

Method The data I use in order to investigate the distribution and morphosyntactic characteristics of PAs in FrPr stem mainly from the ALAVAL (http://alaval.unine.ch/), an audiovisual database consisting of (mainly) questionnaire data from 25 different FrPr varieties, 21 of them spoken in the Valais (additional 2 in the Aosta Valley and Haute-Savoie each). I have identified all the sentences in the corpus containing relevant noun phrases, i.e. NPs preceded by a PA (or invariable de), as well as the ones where a PA in the input sentence was translated by a definite article and tagged them for various (morpho-)syntactic properties like e.g. gender and number or syntactic function. This annotated data constitutes an important part of the newly created DiFuPaRo database, which shall allow me to find/show correlations between different features (e.g. absence of number marking on the noun and presence of fully-fledged singular PA, cf. Stark 2016) to account for the (non-)existence of partitive articles in FrPr. As there are lacunae in the corpus (e.g., there is nothing known about the subjecthood or scope properties of PAs from the existing data), we created a questionnaire focusing on PAs in different contexts. It consists of two parts (French-Francoprovençal translations and a grammaticality judgment test) and has by now already been used in fieldwork in Evolène in July 2019. The database will thus be extended with additional data from this variety as well as with data from future fieldwork in Bulle (November 2019) and the Médoc region in France (February 2020).

First findings There are several observations that I have made so far:
(i) The areas of Francoprovençal A and B can be confirmed to a large extent.
Similar to French, number marking on the noun is (highly) defective: masculine nouns aren’t marked for number at all (except for one variety), with feminine nouns the number distinction doesn’t seem to be systematic (anymore) either.

In several varieties of Francoprovençal B a fully-fledged PA can be found, contrary to the literature (cf. also Stark/Gerards accepted). Interestingly, there seems to be a gender bias, with PAs being much more frequent with feminine than with masculine nouns.

In various of the Francoprovençal A varieties the PA is frequently used also in negative contexts and after quantifiers (30%), contrary to (standard) French.

The use of a PA/de seems obligatory in every syntactic context in all the 25 varieties, i.e. the use of a bare noun is syntactically out.

The definite article seems to be an alternative to the PA in some contexts. The FrPr varieties resemble Italian (dialects) in this aspect (cf. Giusti accepted).

Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>August 2018 – May 2019</td>
<td>Extraction and annotation of relevant data from the ALAVAL; identification of interesting phenomena in the data; literature on FrPr and PAs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June – July 2019</td>
<td>Preparation of questionnaire for fieldwork, first fieldwork in Evolène</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August – November 2019</td>
<td>Evaluation of fieldwork data; talks in network/project meetings; literature review; getting familiar with R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2019</td>
<td>Second fieldwork in Bulle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2019 – February 2020</td>
<td>Evaluation of fieldwork data; testing first hypotheses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2020</td>
<td>Third fieldwork in Médoc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February – July 2020</td>
<td>Evaluation of fieldwork data; joint paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August – November 2020</td>
<td>Draft first and second chapter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2020 – March 2021</td>
<td>Draft third and fourth chapter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April – May 2021</td>
<td>Draft fifth chapter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2021</td>
<td>Finish thesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2021</td>
<td>Submission</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Selected References


Stark, Elisabeth / Gerards, David. accepted. “‘Partitive Articles’ in Aosta Valley Francoprovençal – Old Questions and New Data”, in Ihsane, T. (ed.), Bare Nouns vs. 'Partitive Articles': Disentangling Functions. Leiden/Boston: Brill.