

Week 6

The Basque “definite article” *-a* (II)

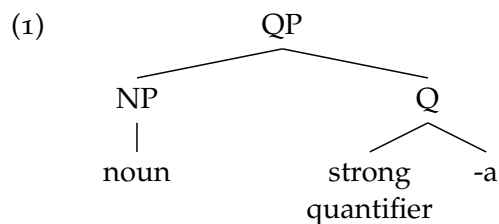
November 24, 2009

1 What we saw in the lasts weeks

Basque quantifiers can be divided into two groups, namely, those that always require *-a*, and those that never allow it.

Always require <i>-a</i>	Never allow <i>-a</i>
<i>guzti</i> ‘all’	<i>batzuek</i> ‘some’
<i>den</i> ‘all’	<i>zenbait</i> ‘some’
<i>gehien</i> ‘most’	<i>hainbat</i> ‘some’
<i>bakoitz</i> ‘each’	<i>asko</i> ‘many’
	<i>gutxi</i> ‘few’
	<i>ugari</i> ‘many’
	numerals
	<i>n baino gehiago</i> ‘more than <i>n</i> ’
	<i>n baino gutxiago</i> ‘less than <i>n</i> ’

The difference is that quantifiers that require *-a* are *strong* quantifiers, whereas those that don’t allow *-a* are *weak* quantifiers. Given that strong quantifiers always presuppose a non-empty domain of application, Etxeberria (2005) proposed that the *-a* that appears with strong quantifiers is a quantificational domain restrictor, which is phonetically null in several other languages (English and German included). Weak quantifiers either don’t have a domain restriction or do it through the partitive construction *-etatik*. Note that *-etatik* necessarily attaches to the noun.



However, that is not all. Two weeks ago we also saw that *-a* can appear in all of the following contexts.

- (2)
- a. Definite NPs.
 - b. Generic NPs.
 - c. Non-specific and existential NPs.

- d. Abstract nouns.
- e. Predicative adjectives in copular clauses.

How can we account for all these cases?

2 Generic vs. existential nouns

In several languages (English among them), bare nouns can get two readings, either existential or generic.

- In the generic reading, we assert that a property holds of all the members of a certain kind.
 - (3) Dinosaurus went extinct 65 million years ago.
The maximal group of all x , where x is a dinosaur.
- In the existential reading, we are asserting that a property holds of a subset of members of a certain kind.
 - (4) Moles are ruining my garden.
Out of the set of all moles, some of them are ruining my garden.

Currently, there are two major ways of accounting for the existence of these readings:

- *The ambiguity analysis* – the two readings arise by means of adding a Generic (GEN) or an Existential (\exists) operator to the bare noun.
- *The NeoCarlsonian analysis* – the generic reading arises by adding a GEN operator to the noun; the existential reading arises by adding a \exists operator *on top of* GEN.

These analysis make different predictions about the availability of the existential reading. Suppose that we could somehow manage to block the generic reading: the ambiguity analysis predicts that the existential reading would still be available, as both are independent from each other; on the other hand, the NeoCarlsonian analysis predicts the opposite, as the existential reading is built from the generic reading.

How can we test this? By adding a *rigid designator* to a bare noun, we can block the generic reading. A standard rigid designator in English is *of the NP* as complement to a noun, i.e.,

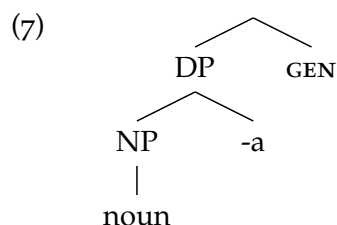
- (5) a. Alice is looking for car parts. (generic/existential/specific)
- b. Alice is looking for parts of her car. (*generic/*existential/specific)

So this is an argument that, in English, existential readings are built on top of a generic reading. Basque behaves the same way.

- (6) a. Mirenek auto zatiak bilatzen ari da
Miren.ERG car parts seeking PROG AUX
[generic/existential/specific]
- b. Mirenek bere autoren zatiak bilatzen ari da
Miren.ERG her car.GEN parts seeking PROG AUX
[*generic/*existential/specific]

3 Etxeberria's analysis

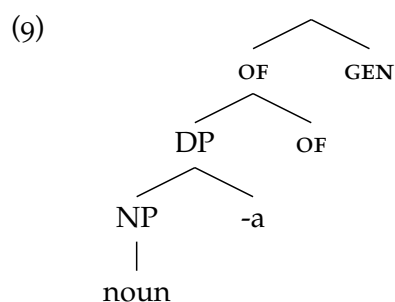
With these data in mind, Etxeberria proposes that, in the absence of a strong quantifier, *-a* is a standard definite article, namely, something that takes the property described by the noun and returns a single instance of that property. The generic reading is achieved by stacking a generic operator (*GEN*) on top of the DP.



This structure, however, is technically problematic: definite DPs are of semantic type $\langle e \rangle$, but *GEN*, by definition, can only take complements of type $\langle et \rangle$ (that is because they take properties and return the maximal set of entities with that property). To solve this problem, Etxeberria notes that French can only get generic readings if a definite DP is introduced by the preposition *de* 'of'.

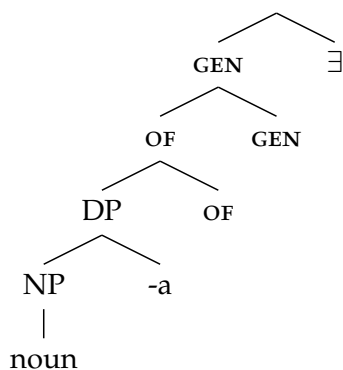
- (8)
- a. *(Des) enfants, ça s'ennuie le dimanche
of.the children that feel.bored the sunday
"Children (usually) feel bored on Sundays"
 - b. *(Du) citron, ça agace les dents
of.the lemon that irritates the teeth
"Lemons irritate your teeth"

The role of this preposition in French is to take a type $\langle e \rangle$ DP and turn it into an $\langle et \rangle$ expression that can combine with *GEN*. Etxeberria's idea is that Basque has a silent counterpart of *de*, which we can represent as *OF*. Thus, we have to reinterpret the above structure as follows.



Consequently, an existential reading arises when a null existential operator takes the above structure under its scope.

(10)



All of this takes care of the necessity of *-a* in environments (2a), (2b), and (2c). What about the rest? To begin with, we can assume that abstract nouns are a species of generics.

- (11) Mendebaldeko herrietan, bizi-itxaropena luzea da.
western.REL countries.pl life.expectancy.DEF long is
“Western countries have a high life expectancy”

The last remaining item (2e) are predicative adjectives in copular clauses. Here too, an existential reading is justified, as we are predicating a property off the subject of the copula; i.e., the property in question is asserted to exist in conjunction with the subject of predication.

- (12) Miren abokatua da.
Miren lawyer.DEF is
“Miren is a lawyer”

4 Summary

We have seen that the Basque “definite article” *-a* has two functions.

1. when it appears next to a strong quantifier (*guzti, den, gehien, bakoitz*), it acts as a contextual domain restrictor.
2. when it appears in a DP without quantifiers, it acts as a regular definite article (equivalent to *the* in English, or *der/die/das* in German). The different readings it can get (definite/generic/specific) depend on the amount of silent operators that we stack on top of it.