The development of nonspecific articles

Laura Becker
University of Erlangen-Nuremberg

13th ALT conference,
September 4-6,
Pavia
Articles
Articles are markers in the nominal domain whose main function is to encode the referential function of the noun that they occur with.

Specific
Not all discourse participants have the knowledge to unambiguously identify the referent, but all discourse participants know that there is a certain single referent.

(1) She met [a new neighbor] this morning.

Nonspecific
There is no single, certain referent linked to the expression; either the discourse participants do not know whether such a referent exists, or it is not relevant which referent of a set of possible referents is referred to.

(2) a. She would like to buy [a house] (but she hasn’t found a suitable one yet).
    b. Have some candy (any piece you like).
Nonspecific articles

An example from Lakota (Siouan, USA/Canada)

(3)  
[igm' wā] wachi  
cat EXSPEC want.s:1sg.o:3sg  
'I want a (particular) cat.'  

(4)  
[igm' wâži] wachi  
cat NONSPEC want.s:1sg.o:3sg  
'I want a (any) cat.'  

- Nonspecific articles are distinct from NPIs like *any* in English.
- Languages with NPIs do not obligatorily need to distinguish between specific and nonspecific referents.
- Languages with nonspecific articles have to mark a nonspecific referent as such.
Areal distribution of nonspecific articles
I will talk about two possible developments of nonspecific articles here.

**Mood marker**

**Irreal > Nonspec**
- Araki (Hidatsa)
- Q’anjobal
- Mocho’
- Tzotzil (Chol)
- (Makah)
- (Nuuchahnulth)

**Real > Def/Spec**

**Predicate marker**

**Pred > Nonspec**
- Tongan
- East Uvean
- Niuafo’ou
- Tokelauan
- Futuna-Aniwa

**Araki Hidatsa**
- Menya
- Assiniboine
- Mandan
- Tutelo
1. IRREALIS > NONSPECIFIC
- **oq** as an irrealis marker of an event:

(5) q-q’anjab’ ayach ta q-ach q’anjab’-oq.  
    pot-talk to.2 cond pot-2pl talk-
    ‘X will talk to you, if you talk.’  
    (Mateo Toledo 2017: 538)

- **oq** as an irrealis marker of a nominal predicate:

(6) man anima-oq hach.  
    neg person-irr 2sg  
    ‘You are not a person.’  
    Q’anjobal (Mateo Toledo 2017: 551)

→ ambiguous reading between irrealis predicate interpretation and nonspecific referential interpretation

- **oq** as a nonspecific marker in a free choice (7) context:

(7) asi’ yul [jun oq tuktuk]  
    go.imp in nonspec tuktuk  
    ‘Let’s take a (any) tuktuk.’  
    (primary data)

Diachronic sources of nonspecific articles  
The development irrealis > nonspecific  
5/17
2. **REALIS > DEFINITE**
1. The emphatic declarative marker -s/-sd(aa’) on the verb

(8) hiirahbí-dhaa agá-waa-sd.
difficult-NEG suppose-1CAUS.DIR=EMPH.DECL
‘I didn’t think it would be hard.’ (Park 2012: 232)

2. The emphatic declarative marker on clausal elements used as arguments

(9) agu-agháàga-gsá-aci-s m-íì-hee.
REL-late-USI-COMPR-EMPH.DECL 1-PRO-EMPH
I’m the one who’s always late. (Park 2012: 407)

3. The definite article -s on nouns without clausal modifiers used as arguments

(10) masúga-s adáàsi-hgua núdhi-Ø.
dog-DEF outdoors-LOC tie-IMPER.SG
‘Tie the dog up outside!’ (Park 2012: 365)
3. *predicate* > *nonspecific*
Some Oceanic languages use **te** as the definite/inclusive-specific article and **he** as the nonspecific article.

In other languages, **te** is an article and **he** rather a predicate marker.
The development PREDICATE > NONSPECIFIC

- **te** & **he**
  - **te** = IN-SPECIFIC / REFERENCEAL
  - **he** = PREDICATE
  - **te** = DEFINITE / IN-SPECIFIC
  - **he** = NONSPECIFIC

1. **Rapa Nui**
   - Maori
2. **Vaeakau-Taumako**
3. **East Uvean**
   - Niuafo’ou
   - Tokelauan
4. Tongan
he as a predicate marker in Rapanui Polynesian, Chile

• **he** is used as predicate marker:

(11) a Thor Heyerdahl [**he** científico e tahi]  
PROP Thor Heyerdahl **PRED** scientist **NUM** one  
‘Thor Heyerdahl was a scientist’  
(Kievet 2017: 452)

• **he** is used to express similarity:

(12) rā me’e era [pē **he** tiare] he mōrī  
**DIST** thing **DIST** like **PRED** flower **PRED** light  
‘Those things like flowers are lights.’  
(Kievet 2017: 452)

• The referential article **te**, instead of the predicate marker **he** is used with nonspecific referents:

(13) he kī ō’oku ki kō’ku  nā pokī taina era mo oho o mātou mo  
NTR say O.POSS:1SG to O.POSS:1SG PL child sibling **DIST** for go of 1PL.EX for  
kimi i [te pipi]  
search ACC **REF** shell  
‘I told my brothers and sisters that we would go to look for shells.’  
Rapa Nui (Kievet 2017: 239)
The marker \( (h)e \) occurs with nominal predicates:

\[(14)\] Na no hinga po a ia [\( e \) no-nohine], ioko ia na na \( e \) DEM IPFV do COMP PERS 3SG PRED RED-WIFE conj 3SG DEM DEM PRED pakhola loa te=na. giant EMPH SPEC=DEM

‘She acts like a woman, but she is really a giant.’
(Næss and Hovdhaugen 2011: 167)

\( (h)e \) occurs with modifiers that are internally-headed relative clauses:

\[(15)\] Lha=ko kutea [hai lakau \( e \) loa la].
3DU=INCP see-TR one tree PRED long DEM

‘They saw a tall tree (They saw a tree which is tall).’
(Næss and Hovdhaugen 2011: 185)
We also find (h)e in negated existential constructions:

(16) Siai loa [e mahila] k=u kapakapa ai i hale.  
    NEG EMPH PRED/NONSPEC knife HORT=1SG work PRO.OBL LDA house  
    ‘There is no knife for me to use in the house.’ (Næss and Hovdhaugen 2011: 167)

And (h)e occurs with nonspecific arguments as well:

(17) Ta he-henga [e nohine] mona.  
    1DU.IN.HORT RED-search PRED/NONSPEC wife BEN-POS:3SG  
    ‘Let’s look for a wife for him.’ (Næss and Hovdhaugen 2011: 166)
East Uvean does not use *he* as a predicate marker; ’e is used instead.

(18) ’e lahi te tagataa.
[**NPST** big **INSPEC** man.**DEF**]
‘The man is big.’

(Livingston 2016: 139)

*he* marks nonspecific referents:

(19) kei au fia kai [**he** mo’i laisi].
[still 1sg want eat **NONSPEC** cl rice]
‘I still want to eate a bit of rice (but am not sure whether there’s any left).’
(Livingston 2016: 43)

*he* is also used in free choice context:

(20) mai **ha’-a** ’aku.
[**DIR1** **NONSPEC**-gen gen.1sg]
‘Give me some.’

(Livingston 2016: 90)
Factors favoring the development of NONSPEC markers

- a systematic REALIS / IRREALIS distinction
- word class flexibility
- definite/other determiners (paradigmaticity)
- relative clause properties
- “broad” applicability of the constructions
  - conditional clauses expressed similarly to relative clauses (IRREAL > NONSPEC)
  - possession expressed by the predicate marker (PRED > NONSPEC)
Lexemes can be **referring** (“noun-like”) or **predicating** (“verb-like”).

This applies to all languages with nonspecific articles.

Independently of their syntactic status, the examples showed that

- the use of the irrealis markers with typical event expressions extends to the use with typical referent expressions in a number of languages.
- this is the only way nonspecific reference can be expressed in those languages:

\[(21)\]

a. *I want a bike.*

b. *I want a thing / one that shall be a bike.*
Relative clause properties

Many languages with nonspecific articles are reported to have internally-headed relative clauses and / or allow for headless relative clauses.

(22) a. I want to buy a bike. (But I haven’t found the right one yet.)
    b. I want to buy [a thing/one/it would be a bike]. (internally-headed RC)
    c. I want to buy [what would be a bike]. (headless RC)

Both relativization strategies may favor

• a stronger integration of the (syntactic/semantic) head into the RC, allowing for the re-interpretation of the irrealis predicate marker as a nonspecific marker of the head noun
• the use of the RC in various argument positions as referential expressions
Conditional clauses & relative clauses

In a number of languages discussed, (irrealis) conditional clauses are similar to relative clauses.

(23)  [mirí aru-madú-hgaa] adí-hgee hirí-c.
    water REL-exist-LOC house-DIM make-DECL
    ‘He built a little house where there was water.’

    Hidatsa (Park 2012: 519)

(24)  [aru-a'iğubxi maa-ééhgee-rúg] aru-nii-maa-hgiwé'-c.
    REL-answer 1A-know-COND IRR-2B-1A-tell-DECL
    ‘If I knew the answer I would tell you.’

    Hidatsa (Park 2012: 288)
In the Oceanic languages with nonspecific articles originating from predicative markers, those markers are also used for possession.

(25) 'e i ai [t-o-ku fale].
    NPST EXIST SPEC-GEN-1SG house
    ‘I have a house.’ (lit. ‘There is a house belonging to me.’)
    East Uvean (Livingston 2016: 87)

(26) 'e mole i ai [h-o-ku fale].
    NPST NEG EXIST NONSPEC-GEN-1SG house
    ‘I don’t have a house.’ (lit. ‘There is no house belonging to me.’)
    East Uvean (Livingston 2016: 87)
Conclusion

IRREALIS / PREDICATE MARKER > NONSPECIFIC MARKER

- Many examples of nonspecific markers may not be nominal markers in the strict sense.

but: Irrealis/predicate markers can develop into markers that are functionally equivalent to nonspecific determiners in that they are the only way of expressing nonspecificity in those languages.

- Irrealis events and nonspecific referents are very similar (they occur in the same contexts).

- Nonspecific referents are less referential than definite or specific referents.

- Given that other languages do conceptualize nonspecific referents as nominal, referential expressions,

referentiality should be treated as a matter of degree.

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>definite</th>
<th>specific</th>
<th>nonspecific</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

predication

reference
Thank you!