Morphosyntactic patterns of inherently unique nouns in Romance languages

Javier Caro Reina
(University of Cologne)

INTRODUCTION

- Nouns such as *sun* and *king* are inherently unique since they constitute monoreferential expressions that denote unique entities (Löbner 2016: 287)
- Cross-linguistically, unique nouns (*king*) may morphosyntactically differ from non-unique ones (*man*) in semantic definite contexts and behave like proper names
- Research on unique nouns has centered around the grammaticalization of the definite article (presence vs. lack of definite article)
- Romance languages provide further evidence for the diverging morphosyntactic behaviour of unique nouns:
  - *Differential Object Marking* (DOM) in Old Spanish
  - Possessive constructions in Old French
  - Lack of article-drop in unmodified PPs in Romanian
  - Different definite articles in Balearic Catalan
- This behaviour has not been properly accounted for in reference and historical grammars
- Unique nouns semantically resemble proper names in that they are monoreferential expressions, which can motivate the morphosyntactic similarities between unique nouns and proper names
- Classification of unique nouns based on Ebert's (1971) universe of discourse and Himmelmann's (1996) dimensions of knowledge

Table 1: Classification of inherently unique nouns

Dimension of knowledge	Universe of discourse	Unique nouns
encyclopedic	world	*pope, sun, moon*
	country	*king, president*
	region	*bishop, count*
	village	*priest*
specific shared	familiar	*boss, doctor*

OBJECTIVES

- Analysis of the diverging morphosyntactic patterns of unique nouns in selected Romance languages (Balearic Catalan, Old French, Old Spanish, and Romanian)
- Comparison between unique nouns and proper names in order to assess the onymic status of unique nouns

DIFFERENTIAL OBJECT MARKING IN OLD SPANISH

- In Old Spanish, DOM is obligatory with proper names (regardless of animacy), but optional with definite human nouns
- In fourteenth-century Spanish, DOM has a relative frequency of 55% (36/66) with human definite NPs (Laca 2006)

  él conoscía **a** *l rey / Ø el hombre*
  'he knew the king / the man.'

- However, human unique nouns such as *rey* 'king' are always *a*-marked as opposed to human non-unique nouns such as *hombre* 'man'
- This implies that in fourteenth-century Spanish, DOM was obligatory not only with personal names but also with human unique nouns
- Unique nouns resemble personal names with respect to DOM, but differ from personal names with respect to the definite article

Table 2: DOM in *El Conde Lucanor* (14th century)

		DOM	noDOM
Personal name	*don Pero Meléndez*	3/3	0/3
Common noun			
unique	*el rey*	9/9	0/9
	el infante	3/3	0/3
	el conde	4/4	0/4
non-unique	*el mozo*	0/5	5/5
	el hombre	0/2	2/2

LACK OF ARTICLE-DROP IN ROMANIAN

- Prepositions selecting the accusative (*în* 'to/in', *pe* 'DOM', etc.) block the occurrence of the definite article (Mardale 2013: 536-540)

  *l-am văzut pe băiat*Ø
  'I saw the boy.'

- However, the definite article can occur with human unique nouns such as *boier* 'boyar', *doctor* 'doctor', *împărat* 'emperor', *popă* 'priest', *regina* 'queen', *şef* 'boss', etc. (AR 2008: 77)

  l-am văzut pe doctor(ul) / împărat(ul)
  'I saw the doctor / the emperor.'

- In this respect, human unique nouns pattern with kinship names, which take the definite article

  l-am văzut pe fratele
  'I saw my brother.'

POSSESSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN OLD FRENCH

- Old French displays possessive constructions involving yuxtaposition (Ø) and preposition (*à, de*) (Palm 1977: 115; GGHF 2020: 998-999)
- Personal names occur with yuxtaposition while human common nouns occur either with yuxtaposition or with preposition

  li filz Ø *Lancelot / Ø le rei / au chevalier*
  'the son of Lancelot / the king / the knight'

- However, human unique nouns such as *rei* 'king' and *reine* 'queen' resemble personal names in that they occur in yuxtaposition
- This implies that in Old French, yuxtaposition was obligatory not only with personal names but also with human unique nouns
- Unique nouns resemble personal names with respect to yuxtaposition, but differ from personal names with respect to the definite article

Table 3: Possessive constructions between 1150-1225 (based on Palm 1977: 115)

		Ø	à	de
Personal name	*Artu*	90%	1%	9%
	Marie	89%	0%	11%
Common noun				
unique	*le rei*	79%	17%	4%
	la reine	79%	0%	21%
non-unique	*le chevalier*	5%	58%	37%
	la dame	19%	52%	34%

DEFINITE ARTICLES IN BALEARIC CATALAN

- Balearic Catalan exhibits different definite articles for unique nouns ("article literari") and non-unique nouns ("article salat") (Grimalt 2009)
- Minimal pairs

  la terra 'the Earth' vs. *sa terra* 'the soil'
  el bisbe 'the bishop' vs. *es bisbe* 'the stomach'

- Note that the different article forms can be employed in semantic definite contexts

  Has vist el rei / es noi?
  'Have you seen the king / the boy?'

- Pluralization and modification of unique nouns give rise to the use of the "article salat"

  el rei / es reis / es nostro rei
  'the king / the kings / our king'

CONCLUSIONS

- The notion of "inherently uniqueness" and the semantic similarities between unique nouns and proper names contribute to a better understanding of the diverging patterns of unique nouns
- In Old Spanish, Old French, and Romanian, unique nouns behave like personal names while in Balearic Catalan they differ from both personal names and common nouns
- Animacy: only human unique nouns in Old Spanish, Old French, and Romanian, but both human and inanimate unique nouns in Balearic Catalan
- Gender: in Old French, masculine unique nouns take the preposition *à* while feminine unique nouns take the preposition *de*

REFERENCES

AR = Academia Română (ed.). 2008. *Gramatica limbii române. I Cuvântul*. Bucureşti: Editura Academiei Române.

GGHF = Marchello-Nizia, C. et al. 2020. *Grande grammaire historique du français*. Berlin, Boston: Walter de Gruyter.

Grimalt, J. A. 2009. Els articles en el parlar de Mallorca. *Estudis romànics* 31. 55-75.

Laca, B. 2006. El objeto directo. La marcación preposicional. In C. Company Company (ed.), *Sintaxis histórica del español. Primera parte: La frase verbal*), 423-475. México: UNAM.

Löbner, S. 2016. The semantics of nominals. In N. Riemer (ed.), *The Routledge handbook of semantics, 283-302*. London, New York: Routledge.

Mardale, A. et al. 2013. Adnominal prepositional phrases. In C. Dobrovie-Sorin & I. Giurgea (eds.), *A reference grammar of Romanian. Volume 1: The noun phrase*, 531–564. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Palm, L. 1977. *La construction "li filz le rei" et les constructions concurrentes avec "a" et "de" étudiées dans les oeuvres littéraires de la seconde moitié du XIIe siècle et du premier quart du XIIIe siècle*. Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell.

PRESENTATION ONLINE AVAILABLE AT