The indefinite article - Indefinite? - Article?

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1 Introduction

Perlmutter (1970) argued that the indefinite article is categorically different from the definite article, and proposed that it is a clitic version of the numeral *one* (cf. also Roehrs (2009)). But there are, as Perlmutter himself pointed out, instances of *a* as well as of *one*, that don't seem to have the semantics of the numeral. Hence a divorce of *a* (and of *one*) from *numeral*-hood is called for (cf. Kayne (2009)). Furthermore, there are instances of what looks like the indefinite article (e.g. German *ein* or its Dutch etc. counterpart) which occur in contexts from which the indefinite article is supposed to be excluded: with plural nouns, with non-count nouns, in definite noun phrases, etc. This state of affairs was addressed by Bennis et al. (1998), and others since, by reference to a so-called '*spurious article*', homophonous with the traditional indefinite article *een/ein*.

The goal of the present paper is twofold: First of all, I argue that German *ein* is not always an 'indefinite article', and, pursuing the idea that there is only one *ein*, it is hence never an 'indefinite article'. Secondly, I explore some consequences for the structural representation of certain function words which contain *ein* as one of their components, in particular *kein* as well as its English counterpart *no*. The discussion promotes a strongly non-lexicalist view, advocating a syntactic derivation of function words that involves movement (cf. Leu, 2008a, 2010).[1]

2 Zooming in on the "indefinite article"

The traditional term *indefinite article* is useful for a number of purposes (lexicography, language teaching, etc.). But from the perspective of theoretical linguistics, it stands in the way of a better understanding of the nature of, e.g., German *ein*.

2.1 *einem*: *ein+em*

Consider (1).

(1)   mit einem Trick   German
         with a.DAT trick

Most linguists would agree that *einem* in (1) is the German indefinite article. It is, however, also immediately clear that this is an imprecision. It entails, for instance, that *em* of *einem* in (1) is part of the indefinite article. However, arguably the same *em* occurs in definite contexts (2a,b) and in adjectival contexts (2c), i.e. in the absence of an indefinite article. And finally, the indefinite article sometimes occurs without the *em* (2d).

(2)   a.   mit d-em   Trick   ⇒   *-em* occurs in definite contexts.
            with the-DAT trick

    b.   mit ihm   ⇒   *-em* occurs in definite contexts.
            with him.DAT

    c.   mit rot-em Wein   ⇒   *-em* suffixes to non-articles (e.g. adjectives).
            with red-DAT wine

    d.   Ein Trick genügt.   ⇒ sometimes the "indef. art." occurs without *-em*.
            A   trick suffices

Hence we can conclude that *-em* is not part of the "indefinite article." In fact this *em* is a dative case marker.

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[1] Aspects of this work were inspired by R. Kayne's spring 2011 NYU lectures in morphosyntax. For helpful discussion I'm particularly grateful to Oana Săvescu and Raffaella Zanuttini.

2.2 *ein*: [...]+*ein*

Many linguists would presumably agree with the idea that *em* is not literally part of the indefinite article in (1), and will point out that what s/he meant is really *ein*, as e.g. in (3a). It is further also widely agreed upon that the indefinite article has certain properties: It marks the containing noun phrase as indefinite (3a), and distributionally speaking it is incompatible with plural nouns (3b) and with non-count nouns (3c).

(3)   The indefinite article is...

    a.   **Ein** Hund hat mich angebellt.   ...indefinite
           a   dog has me at.barked

    b.   (*Eine) Hunde haben mich angebellt.   ...incompatible with plural nouns
           (a)   dogs have me at.barked

    c.   (*Ein) Wissen   ist (*eine) Macht.   ...incompatible with non-count nouns
           (a)   knowledge is (a)   power

But given these properties we can, with the same kind of argument as above in section 2.1, question whether *ein* is really the "indefinite article." Consider examples (4), which show that sometimes *ein* occurs in definite contexts (4a), that sometimes *ein* occurs with plural nouns (4b), and that sometimes *ein* occurs with non-count nouns (4c).[2]

(4)   *ein* occurs...

    a.   **D**ein Bier wird warm.   ...in definite contexts
           your beer gets warm

    b.   **M**eine Freunde sind schon da.   ...with a plural noun
           my   friends are already here

    c.   Ich brauche k**ein** Wasser.   ...with a non-count noun
           I   need   no   water

Hence we can conclude that *ein* is not the indefinite article. But if so, then what is the 'indefinite article'? - And what is *ein*? - The rest of the paper is devoted to addressing these two questions.

3 What is the "indefinite article"?

The proposal in this section is that the indefinite article does not exist.[3] What exists is a set of zero-operators which constitute a subset of operators that occur to the left of *ein*. Consider the examples in (5).[4]

(5)   a.   m-ein Buch   'my   book'   b.   k-ein Buch   'no book'
                 d-ein Buch   'your book'   no   book
                 s-ein Buch   'his/her book'

        c.   welch ein Buch 'what a book'   d.   was für ein Buch 'what kind of book'
             which a   Buch   what for a   book

The element *ein* can be preceded by a person element, as in (5a), which has referential properties and is associated with possessor semantics. Or it can be preceded by an element that is associated with negative quantification (5b). Or it can be preceded by a wh-element, as in (5c,d), which is associated with illocutionary force as well as quantificational properties, and which syntactically is

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[2]Bennis et al. (1998) discuss occurrences in Dutch of a "spurious" article, i.e. an indefinite article occurring with mass nouns, plurals, and proper names in certain environments (cf. Haegeman (2007); Leu (2010); Roehrs (2009)).

[3]The idea that there is no "indefinite article" has been proposed previously, cf. Vater (1982) and subsequent work, who treats German *ein* as a Q head, distinct from the category of the definite article.

[4]Cf. also Roehrs (2009) for discussion of morphologically complex words involving *ein*.

clearly a phrasal constituent. Let us refer to the set of things that precede *ein* in each of the above examples as operators.

The noun phrases in (5) enter into distinct quantificational / referential / (person-)deictic relations with the containing clause and the context of utterance. Notice that it is the constituent preceding *ein* that determines most of the semantic properties of the noun phrase. Assuming that it is correct to attribute to the noun phrase in (6a) certain semantic aspects in the realm of quantification and/or referentiality not shared with all the examples in (5), it (almost) follows from compositionality that the right analysis of (6a) features a zero-operator, as represented in (6b).[5]

(6)   a.   ein Buch
              a   book

       b. $[OP^{IA}]$ + ein Buch

We may ask how OP^{IA} is integrated in the noun phrase, or, more narrowly, what the relation between *ein* and OP^{IA} is. I will try and answer one aspect of that question, by looking at other occurrences of *ein*. In a number of (related) cases, it has been argued that the relevant derivations involve movement of a constituent to the left of *ein*. I will briefly mention a few earlier proposals and relevant considerations and suggest treating OP^{IA} analogously.

3.1 Wh - *ein*

One case in which wh-elements have been argued to have the effect of moving a noun modifier to the left of the indefinite article is that of English degree fronting (Bresnan, 1973; Hendrick, 1990; Troseth, 2004; Leu, 2008a).

(7)   a.   a [pretty big] car   ⇒   b.   [how big] (of) a t_{howbig} book. . . ?

Following the lead of English degree fronting, a similar partial derivation is also supported (to varying degrees of obviousness) for the occurrences of *OP ein NP* in (5).

A first plausibly very similar case is that of Germanic *was für* (Leu (2008a), cf. also Vangsnes (2008a,b)).

(8)   a.   was   für ən Buch   German
              what for a   book

       b.   [[$_{XP}$ was für] [ən [Buch t_{XP}]]]

Was für is a basically adjectival modifier with a wh-element. The *was für* constituent can occur to the left of *ein*, or it can occur to the right of (the counterpart of) *ein* (for details see Leu (2008a, chapter 5)), suggesting that when occurring to the left of *ein* it moved there.

The case of *welch ein* seems very similar to that of *was für* (Leu, 2008a, chapter 6). Bennis et al. (1998) and Corver (2004) suggest an analysis in which the wh-element comes to precede *n* by means of leftward movement.

(9)   a.   wat   n boeken   Dutch
              what a books

       b.   [$_{DP}$ wat$_j$ [$_{D'}$ [$_D$[$_X$ 'n]$_k$] [$_{XP}$ boeken [$_{X'}$ t$_k$ t$_j$]]]]

Notice in this example that the *n* precedes a plural noun (cf. also Haegeman (2007) on West Flemish *wek*).

3.2 Possessive *m-ein*

In a similar vein, Den Dikken (1998) and Corver (2004) propose that the possessive determiner (the Dutch cognate of German) *mein* be analyzed as involving movement of the possessor to the left of *n*. Notice that the two components that make up *mijn ('my')* do not form a constituent on this view.

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[5]The IA superscript to the operator OP is a notational means to distinguish the null operator from the overt elements that precede *ein* in (5), and which form a natural class with OP^{IA} in the currently relevant respects.

(10) a. mijn boeken   Dutch
          my   books

     b. $[_{DP}\ [_{PP}\ \text{Pø mij}]_j\ [_{D'}\ [_D[_X\ \text{'n}]_k]\ [_{XP}\ \text{boeken}\ [_{X'}\ t_k\ t_j\ ]]]]$

The idea that at some point in the derivation the possessor moves to the left is supported for instance
by the fact about Hungarian that the possesee nominal supports agreement morphology, agreeing
with the possessor (Szabolcsi, 1994). Assuming no upward probing, the possessor must originate in
a position lower than the agreement head (or in its Spec).
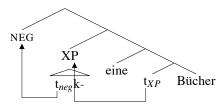
3.3 *k-ein*

Finally, we are left with the negative determiner *kein ('no')*. Recalling the above argument from
English degree fronting, note that such degree fronting can be triggered not only by a wh-element
but also by a negative element (Troseth, 2004), as in (11).

(11) a. a [very good] student   ⇒   b. [*(not) very good] (of) a $t_{notverygood}$ student

Hence NEG can also trigger noun phrase internal movement in such cases. Let me propose, by
analogy to the above cases, that *kein* involves movement of a constituent containing *k* to the left of
ein (Leu, 2008a).[6]

(12) $[_{xAP}\ \text{NEG k-}]_j\ \text{eine}\ t_j\ \text{Bücher}$

(13)

3.4 *ein* and the indefinite article

I mentioned earlier that in a number of cases, e.g. (9), *n* (i.e. *ein*) can occur with mass nouns,
plurals, and even proper names, and often doesn't seem to contribute indefiniteness. Bennis et al.
(1998) conclude that in such cases it is not the indefinite article, but a what they call *spurious article*.

 Let us agree with this conclusion.[7] But let us note that this results in a case of homonymy
between the "spurious" *ein* and the "real article" *ein*. Furthermore, not only do the two articles
sound the same, but they also exhibit identical inflectional properties, both with regard to their own
inflection and with regard to the inflection "triggered" on a following adjective. Hence settling for
accidental homonymy would mean declaring defeat. The proposal in (6), on the other hand, offers
an immediate and simple remedy to the accidental quality of this homonymism, at the expense of
the postulate of a (possibly single-membered) set of silent operators.

3.5 Conclusion

I conclude that what traditional grammatical descriptions call the *indefinite article* is really a con-
glomerate of components of a partial derivation in which *ein* is merged and a (phonetically zero)
operator moves to the left of it.[8]

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[6]The idea that *kein ('no')* is (at least) bi-morphemic seems standardly accepted (Zeijlstra (2004); Penka and
Zeijlstra (2005); Roehrs (2009), cf. also Klima (1964)). In fact, its Old High German ancestor *nihein* seems to
derive from (at least) three components, being composed of *ni+uh+* numeral *ein*, i.e. *'not + and/also + one'*
(Pfeifer, 2003).

[7]In Leu (2008b) I disagreed with it for reasons that are obviated by the present proposal.

[8]Indefinite noun phrases have a number of possible readings (Diesing, 1992; Ihsane, 2008). It is conceivable
that these should be distinguished (in part) in terms of different operators. The question of why they are non-
overt in what looks like a systematic fashion would become increasingly salient.

(14)   Proposal: [OP^{IA} [ein ...t Buch]]

In other words, I propose that *ein* is never the indefinite article.

4   What is *ein*?

Assuming the preceding discussion to be on the right track, we know what *ein* isn't, namely an indefinite article. But we still don't know what *ein* is.

The goals of this (somewhat programmatic) section hence are (A) to find a unifying theme that characterizes all the occurrences of *ein* in (5), and (B) to explore certain immediate structural/derivational consequences.[9]

4.1 *ein* and numerals

In one of its occurrences, *ein* is traditionally called a numeral. The idea that the indefinite article *ein* and the numeral *ein* are related is widely acknowledged (Perlmutter, 1970; Kayne, 2009; Roehrs, 2009, among others) and should be taken seriously.

Let us consider Kayne's (2009) proposal that the numeral *one* is really the indefinite article adjacent to a silent SINGLE.

(15)   a.   a single book
        b.   one SINGLE book

This proposal immediately unifies the two uses of *ein* distinguishing them in terms of the context of occurrence. The unification aspect is appealing and I want to retain it.

Kayne (2009) further discusses other numerals and proposes that they occur in the specifier of the indefinite article, in which case the indefinite article remains unpronounced. I will directly adopt the essence of this proposal, in combination with Kayne's (2005b) proposal that (certain) quantity expressions (e.g. *many* and *few*) are accompanied by a (silent) nominal NUMBER. Specifically, I adopt the idea that the numeral interpretation derives from association with such a (silent) nominal NUMBER. Thus we arrive at the idea that the numeral use of *ein* has the representation in (16).

(16)   numeral |1|:   ein Buch   ⇒   SINGLE ein NUMBER Buch

The intuition behind the proposal leans on the observation that *ein* is related to *in* (as is certainly the case in locative expressions[10]). Similarly, the intuition is easily accessible in my corresponding proposal for numerals higher than *one* (in English):

(17)   numerals > |1|:   four books   ⇒   four   IN NUMBER books

4.2 M-*ein* and French possessives

In section 3.2 we encountered the idea that possessive determiners like *mein ('my')* consist of two elements: a possessor and a functional element that relates the possessor and the possessee.

(18)   [$_{DP}$ [$_{PP}$ Pø mij]$_j$ [$_{D'}$ [$_D$[$_X$ 'n]$_k$] [$_{XP}$ boeken [$_{X'}$ t$_k$ t$_j$]]]]]

In the case of German *mein* that relating element is *ein*. Possibly this should be related to French (19b,c), suggesting a correspondence between German *(ei)n* and French *de/à* (cf. Kayne (1994); Den Dikken (1998); Corver (2004); Leu (2008a)).

(19)   a.   m-**ein** Buch   b.   le livre **de** Jean   c.   un ami **à** moi
              my-*ein* book   the book of John   a friend of me

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[9]Den Dikken (2006) foreshadows aspects of the present proposal by generating spurious *een* as the relator of a small clause, on a par with Dutch/German *als*, English *as* and the like, i.e. prepositional elements.

[10]To the extent that this parallelism is not accidental, we will consider that the locative aspect of the occurrences of *ein* in *einbrechen ('break in')*, *hinein ('in')* etc. are not so much reflexes of inherent semantic properties of *ein*, but should rather be ascribed to a component analogous to NUMBER in (16) and (17), but with the relevant semantics, e.g. a silent nominal PLACE (cf. Kayne (2007)).

4.3 K-*ein* and French and English negatives

Finally, let me address *kein*. I noted, in section 3.3, that *kein* consists of (at least) two constituents *k-* and *-ein*, and that the position of *k-* to the left of *ein* is the result of syntactic movement.

(20)   a.   keine Bücher   b.   [NEG k-]$_j$ eine t$_j$ Bücher
              no   books

I also noted that *k* may not be the actual carrier of negativity, but that it is associated with an (often) silent negative morpheme *n*. This is, of course, well motivated within a Germanic (and more widely an Indo-European) context. Let us, therefore, start with a look at a number of occurrences of negative *n* in English and German.

(21)   a.   **n**-ot   b.   **n**'t   c.   **n**-icht   d.   **n**-o   ⇒ *n* is a negative morpheme
              n-o one   **n**-ever   **n**-ie   **n**-ein

It is clear that in the examples in (21) *n* is a negative morpheme, and presumably the same negative morpheme across all the examples in (21). A next step involves addressing the constituent structure of the remaining parts of the words in (21). In English, an element *o* is isolable, as well as a *t*. The presence/absence of these elements is syntactically constrained (e.g. *n't* is restricted to finite contexts, contrary to *not*).

The recognition of the morpheme status of *n* and *o* must be extended to the examples in (22a-b'). Let us agree that the *o* in (22a) is the same as the one in (22a'), and that the *o* in (22a') is (morphosyntactically) the same as that in (22b). In all three cases, a negative constituent, *n*, precedes *o* and a nominal constituent follows it. (On *not* see below.)

(22)   a.   n-**o** book   b.   n-**o**-thing   c.   nine'**o**'clock   ⇒ *o* is a variant of '*of*'
        a'.   n-**o**-body   b'.   n-**o**-t   c'.   barrel **o**'monkeys

English also has (22c,c'), where, similarly, a quantificational constituent precedes *o* and a nominal constituent follows it. These latter instances of *o* are usually taken to be variants of the preposition *of* (or perhaps *on*). Phonologically they are distinct, varying within the same range as the range delimited by (22a) and (22b), impressionistically speaking. Given these parallels, I propose that the *o* in (22a,a',b) is a variant of *of*.[11,12]

This proposal puts the potential parallelism in (23) between French and English immediately within reach.

(23)   English: n   **o**   books
        proposal: NEG   of   books
        French: pas   **de**   livres

We note that in French the actual negative component, *n* is not immediately present, but in a removed position, reminiscent of German *kein*, to which the parallelism extends straightforwardly, given the preceding discussion.

(24)   English: n   **o**   books
        French: pas   **de**   livres
        German: k   **ein**e t$_k$ Bücher

The morphematic analysis of *n-o* must also extend to the fragment negation *no*. In other words, *n* in *No!* (and similarly in German *Nein!*) is a negative constituent moving to the left of *-o* (German *-ein*), presumably out of an elided clause (Holmberg, 2004).

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[11]Note that French object *pas un NP* versus *pas de NP* seems to correspond to German *ein- NP …nicht* versus *kein NP*.
Baunaz (2008, p.174,370ff.) notes that in French *pas un NP* is the subject counterpart of object *pas de NP*.

[12]The idea of decomposing *not* as *n-o-t* was inspired by R. Kayne's spring 2011 seminar at NYU. *Barrel o'monkeys* was pointed out to me by Sarah Nakamaru.

(25)   English: No!   cf. *n-o* ...
        German: Nein!   cf. *n-ein* ...t_n

Finally, the scope of the above discussion must include *not*. More precisely, on the set of assumptions entertained in this paper, *not* is derived in the syntax, in a way that involves movement of *n* to the left of *o*. This leaves the the question of the status of *t* in *n-o-t*. Considering the facts in (22) and French (24), let me suggest that *-t* is a nominal constituent, akin to *it*.[13]

(26)   not: n   o   t   derived by movement of *n*:   n o t_n t
                NEG OF IT

This opens up the possibility that negation always originates within a nominal category. If so, we will ultimately want to understand why that should be so.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, I have argued that the semantic contribution of the "indefinite article," e.g. in German *ein Buch*, should likely be attributed to a silent operator OP^{IA}:

(27)   *OP^{IA} ein Buch*

This essentially implies that *ein* is always "spurious" qua *indefinite article*, in all its occurrences. In addressing the status/category of *ein*, I have propose that an analysis of *ein* should take into account certain parallels with prepositions such as *in, of, de*, and reduced variants thereof. Spinning the thread a little further I have arrived at the view that negative function words are syntactically complex and that negation may always originate within a nominal projection.

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[13]Jon Brennan and Jim Wood independently suggested to me that *t* in *not* may be nominal (cf. *it*), which, as noted, seems plausible, cf. French *pas, point* etc.

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