Persistence in the Grammaticalization of the English Indefinite Article

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Lee, Hyeyeon. 2013. Persistence in the Grammaticalization of the English Indefinite Article. *SNU Working Papers in English Linguistics and Language 11, 62-73.* This paper proposes that Hopper (1991)'s Principle of Persistence can be well observed in the grammaticalization process of the English indefinite article. Persistence is an aspect of grammaticalization in which the traces of a grammaticalized item's former lexical meaning are reflected in the constraints on its grammatical distribution. The persistence effect is evident in Present-day English when we look at the distributional constraints of the English indefinite article. The persistent 'singular' meaning of *a/an* keeps it from appearing with uncountable nouns and plural nouns, or with other numerals. Such an adherence of meaning is not only limited to the English indefinite article, but are also apparent in the classifier system of Malay and in the plural indefinite interpretation of Spanish. **(Seoul National University)**

1. Introduction

The English indefinite article *a/an* exhibits a typical case of grammaticalization (Hopper & Traugott 2003; Traugott 1982). In the development of the OE numeral *an* 'one' into the Present-day English indefinite article *a/an*, it exhibits the typical properties of grammaticalization. It underwent phonological reduction, as noted in Hopper and Traugott (2003), among others. In OE, the form was *an*, with a long vowel. Later, its cliticized form became de-stressed and came to form a single accentual unit with the following noun or constituent of the NP. Also, *-n* is absent before consonants in Present-day English and *a* and *an* thus alternate, unlike in OE.

Its meaning and usage also changed to a more grammatical and

functional one. Givón (1981) notes that English is at the latest diachronic continuum in the development process from the numeral 'one' to the indefinite article. It can mark both referential and non-referential nouns, in contrast to that in the earlier stages in the grammaticalization process, where it can only mark referential nouns.

Aside from the previous discussions on the grammaticalization of the English indefinite article, there is an aspect of it that did not get much attention from the scholars. It is that the grammaticalization of *a/an* exhibits a clear case of Hopper (1991)'s Principle of Persistence, both in the present-day distributional constraints and in the history of its development in competition with *sum*. Evidence from two other language groups supports the plausibility of the persistence effect of 'one.' A classifier in Malay that originates from the numeral 'one' behaves very much like the English indefinite article in terms of the distributional constraint, and this is viewed as a persistence effect by Hopper and Traugott (2003). Also, the fact that the Spanish plural indefinite articles are interpreted as a unit or a pair (Herslund 2012) implies that the persistence effect is also present in Romance languages.

2. Persistence and the English Indefinite Article
2.1 The Definition of Persistence and an Example

Hopper proposes five principles of grammaticalization in his important paper "On Some Principles of Grammaticalization (1991)." One of these five principles is 'Persistence,' which is defined in (1):

(1) "When a form undergoes grammaticalization from a lexical to a grammatical function, so long as it is grammatically viable some traces of its original lexical meanings tend to adhere to it, and

details of its lexical history may be reflected in constraints on its grammatical distribution." (Hopper 1991: 22)

This relates the meaning and function of a grammatical form to its history as a lexical morpheme. When a form is polysemous, one or more of its meanings reflect a dominant earlier meaning (Hopper 1991).

The accusative marker in a West African language Gã provides a good illustration of Persistence. Its accusative marker, kɛ́, is originally a verb, meaning 'take.' The restriction on the distribution of kɛ́ is due to Persistence, in that kɛ́ can only mark objects which can be 'taken.' That is, it cannot be used when the verb is an effective verb as in (2).

(2) È ŋmè wɔlɔ̀ 'She laid an egg.'
    BUT NOT: *È kɛ̀ wɔlɔ̀ ŋmè 'She kɛ̀ egg lay' (Hopper 1991: 28)

Nor can it be used with a verb whose object is experienced rather than affected as in (3) (Hopper 1991).

(3) Tɛ̀tɛ̀ nà Kɔkɔ̀ 'Tete saw Koko.'
    BUT NOT: *Tɛ̀tɛ̀ kɛ̀ Kɔkɔ̀ nà 'Tete kɛ̀ Koko saw' (Hopper 1991: 28)

2.2 Persistence and the asymmetry in the English article system

There is an asymmetry in the English article system that has been noted by many previous scholars and grammar books (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan 1999; Longobardi 2003; Pelletier 1975; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, Svartvik, & Crystal 1985).

(4) The Distribution of the English Articles

		Definite	Indefinite
Count nouns	singular	the book	a book
	plural	the books	(some) books
Mass nouns		the milk	(some) milk

(4) shows this asymmetry. The definite article *the* appears in the DP position of any kind of head noun; count, mass, singular and plural. On the other hand, the distribution of the indefinite article *a/an* is much more restricted in that it cannot appear with plural or mass nouns. The canonical indefinite plural NP is the bare plural, although *some* can be used in non-generic usages.

This asymmetry poses a question because it is not inherent in the meaning of the plural and mass nouns that they cannot be indefinite. Plural nouns and mass nouns can just as well be either definite or indefinite like singular nouns.

The motivation for this asymmetry can be explained as the persistence of the meaning of OE *an*. The OE meaning of *an* as the numeral 'one' persists and prevents plural nouns or uncountable nouns from appearing with the indefinite article *a/an*. It is clear that the 'plurality' of plural nouns and the persistent meaning of 'one' would not be compatible. Also, uncountable mass nouns can by no means be specified in terms of their number, and are thus incompatible with the persistent 'singular' meaning of *a/an*[1*].

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[1] There are cases in which mass nouns can appear with the indefinite article. This is when mass nouns become 'countable' in the given context, as in the sentence, 'I'll have a hot milk.'

2.3 Distribution of English articles with numerals

There is another restriction in the distribution of the English indefinite article. It never (or very rarely) precedes the numeral *one* as in (5b), while the definite article does in (5a).

   (5) a. the one book
       b. *a one book
       c. a book

The numeral *one* can follow the definite article *the* when it is necessary to specify the number of the definite noun, depending on the context. However, *one* cannot follow the indefinite article in a situation where the indefinite noun is singular. Actually, (5c) itself implies that there is only one book. This interpretation is due to the fact that the indefinite article, in fact, does not occur with plural nouns, and the fact that there is a persistent 'singular' meaning in *a/an* itself.

In fact, the indefinite article cannot co-occur with any numeral at all. It can never precede numerals of plural number (*two*, *three*, …), as in (6b). Compare this with (6a). This restriction is in line with the fact that the indefinite article does not co-occur with plural nouns. Again, there is a difference between the definite article and the indefinite article.

   (6) a. the two books
       b. *a two books

In sum, the English indefinite article, in contrast with the definite article, does not introduce uncountable NP's, and when the NP's are countable, they must be singular in order to allow the appearance of the indefinite article. That is, the indefinite article only precedes countable singular NP's.

I propose that this is a distributional constraint owing to the Principle of Persistence. A trace of the former lexical meaning of *a/an* as a numeral ('one,' to be exact) must have adhered to the present-day indefinite article, and caused the constraints in Present-day English.

2.4 Persistence and the development of *sum* and *an*

It was noted in 2.2 that the typical indefinite article *a/an* is only used with count singular nouns and that *some* tends to precede plural and mass nouns in certain contexts. However, the usages of *a/an* and *sum* were not divided in this way during the Old English period. According to Hopper and Martin (1987), *sum* and *an* were both non-anaphoric devices in NP's. NP's introduced by *sum* or *an* were presented into the discourse, which means that *sum* and *an* were presentative markers. This period can be seen as the earliest stage in the rise of 'one' as an indefinite marker. During this stage, it marks only referential indefinite nouns (Givón 1981).

The difference between *sum* and *an* during this period was in the degree of salience in the discourse. *Sum* often introduces important participants of the discourse such as human protagonists, while NP's introduced by *an* are less salient in the discourse as a whole, possibly being neither a protagonist nor the stage setting (Hopper and Martin 1987).

By the 10th century, however, the role of *sum* became more specialized. Its role as a presentative marker continued on, but it tended to occur more with plurals and generics. *An*, on the other hand, became the more typical singular indefinite marker[2*].

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[2] It is to be taken into account that this change is not a sudden one. From the Old English period, *an* functioned to introduce an NP, meaning 'certain.' Its role, however, gradually broadened to introduce both referential and non-referential NP's, finally becoming an indefinite marker. Traugott (1982) views this change as a change of meaning from a propositional one to a textual one.

An interesting point in this development is the later functional division of *sum* and *an*. The previous difference between *sum* and *an* was in the salience in the discourse, while the later difference more or less lies in the singularity (plurality) of the NP. One reason for this development can be persistence of the meaning of *an*. The 'singular' meaning of *an* possibly prevented it from marking plural NP's, and the function of marking plural NP's was thus yielded to *sum*.

3. Persistence of Numeral Meaning in Other Languages
3.1 The classifier *suatu* in Malay

A similar distributional constraint in Malay (Hopper 1986) supports that the persistence of the numeral meaning is a possible and plausible phenomenon. In Malay, nouns in certain contexts must be introduced by a classifier. They can follow any number words as in (7), (8), and (9).

(7) Ada-lah   kami   lihat   tiga   *orang*   budak-budak
     happen   we   see   three   CL   boy-PL
      kena   hukum.
      get   punishment
   'We happened to see three CL boys being punished.' (Hopper 1986: 64)

(8) Maka   pada   suatu   pagi   kelihatan-lah
     and   on   one   morning was:seen-PARTICLE
     sa-buah   kapal   rendah.
     a:CL   ship   low
   'Then one morning a CL low ship was sighted.' (Hopper 1986: 77)

(9) Mati-lah   tiga   *ekor*   tikus.

dead-PARTICLE   three   CL   rat
'Three CL rats were killed.' (Hopper 1986: 144)

In the above sentences, *orang*, *buah*, and *ekor* are classifiers that are each used before human nouns, before bulky objects, and before animals, respectively. In (7) and (9), the classifiers are preceded by the numeral *tiga* 'three.' The classifiers also allow the attachment of the singular clitic *sa-* 'one, a,' as in (8) *sa-buah*, when the noun is singular. Additionally, there is a more general classifier *suatu* used before singular objects. It is remarkable that *suatu* is always singular and is never preceded by any other number word or the singular clitic *sa-*. This is shown in (10).

(10) Maka   di-beri-nya   hadiah   akan   Sultain itu
     and   he-gave   as-gift to   Sultan   the
     suatu   kereta   bogi.
     a:CL   carriage buggy
     'And he gave a CL buggy carriage to the Sultan as a gift.'
     (Hopper 1986: 166)

The reason why *suatu* is always singular is because the *s-* of *suatu* is historically the same singular morpheme *sa-* that is found in other classifiers as a singular clitic. This is very similar to the distributional constraint of the English indefinite article. The English indefinite article, too, cannot occur with any other number word ((6b)) and cannot occur with *one* ((5b)). The motivation for this is the same as the constraints on the Malay classifier *suatu*, in that the lexical histories of *suatu* and *a/an* both involve the number 'one.'

3.2 Plural indefinite interpretations in Romance languages

It is noted in Givón (1981) that the development of the numeral 'one' into an indefinite marker is a universal process, found in Germanic, Romance, Mandarin, Sherpa, Hungarian, Neo-Aramaic, Persian, Turkish, various Amerindian and Austronesian languages, and all Creole languages.

It is possible, then, to question if the effects of persistence present in the distribution of the English indefinite article also exist in other languages whose indefinite articles also have their origins in the numeral 'one.' The indefinite articles of modern Romance languages developed from the Latin numeral *unum* (Herslund 2012). In this respect, the inflected plural forms of the indefinite article in several Romance languages are in need of an explanation. In this section, I will examine the distribution of the indefinite article in Spanish, one of these Romance languages.

3.2.1 The actual nature of the Spanish plural indefinite article

The Spanish indefinite article inflects in gender and number. Therefore, its four inflected forms are: *un* (masculine singular), *una* (feminine singular), *unos* (masculine plural) and *unas* (feminine plural).

If, as in English, it can be assumed that the meaning of *unum* 'one' persists in the Present-day Spanish indefinite article, the existence of plural inflected forms of the indefinite article seems very odd and contradictory.

However, Herslund (2008, 2012) makes a very strong argument that the plural forms of the indefinite article in Old French, Spanish, Catalan and Portuguese denotes collectives, that is, structured *sets* of entities. Therefore, the normal plural of Spanish *una casa* 'a house' is not *unas casas*, but the bare plural *casas* 'houses,' as in English.

The meaning of the indefinite plural is actually a plural unit: a set, a series, a pair, etc. This has an implication for the current argument. Spanish, along with some other Romance languages, possesses a plural form of the indefinite article. However, this is only used in special contexts where the entities form a single unit or a set. The reason why the plural indefinite article cannot be the canonical form to mark plural indefinite nouns, and the canonical indefinite form is the bare plural, is due to the Principle of Persistence in effect. The persistent meaning of *unum* must have an influence on this kind of distribution in Romance languages.

4. Further Discussions

It is important to note that the Principle of Persistence is not the only semantic process within grammaticalization. A competing force is the well-known Semantic Bleaching, which is the weakening of the former lexical meaning. Therefore, it is not to be understood that the Principle of Persistence will be in effect in all contexts where *a/an* appears. For instance, consider *a single person*. In this context, *a* does not block *single*, a word with similar meaning, from appearing. It can be assumed that semantic bleaching, rather than persistence, has a stronger effect in this context.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I proposed that the unexplained asymmetry of the English article system, the distribution of articles with numerals, and the reading of the Spanish plural indefinite article should all be explained with the Principle of Persistence taken into account. It is very interesting that the Principle of Persistence remains in effect in the

latest stage of grammaticalization, which is the case for the grammaticalization of Germanic and Romance articles.

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