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Basque nominals: from a system with bare nouns to a system without¹

Urtzi Etxeberria (CNRS-IKER)

Abstract:

The first aim of this paper is to make a thorough description of the use of nominals as well as of the use of the definite determiner in both Souletin (the most eastern dialect of Basque) and Standard Basque (plus the rest of Basque dialects). Then, assuming that Souletin is a previous stage compared to Standard Basque (cf. Michelena 1964, Camino to appear; cf. also Manterola 2012), the main aim of this paper is to explain how Basque historically moves from a situation where bare nouns (BNs) are allowed (in some restricted argument position and only in Souletin) to a situation where BNs are not allowed in argument position (Standard Basque). This paper argues that the reason we move from system A to system B is basically due to a semantic weakening and loss of the Souletin null D: (i) in Souletin BNs are full DPs with an empty head occupied by a phonetically null D—with indefinite reference and unspecified for number—, partly in line with Longobardi (1994, 2001); (ii) this null D loses its semantic features and since it is null it cannot be reanalyzed and gets lost; (iii) in Standard Basque, since null D is no longer available, the definite article [-a]—which will be argued to be a semantically flexible element—takes its place, as is phonologically a weak element, i.e. a suffix, and so the closest phonological alternative to the null D.

1. Introduction

Basque has usually been described to have a very interesting distinctive property when it comes to the use of nominal expressions: BNs cannot appear in argument position, or to put it in other words, the presence of the overt definite article appears to be obligatory in Basque argumental nominals (cf. among others, Laka 1993, Artiagoitia 1997, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2012, Etxeberria 2005, 2006, 2010, 2012a; cf. also section 2).² However, this property

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Abbreviations used in the glosses: aux = auxiliary; aux.sg = singular auxiliary; aux.pl = plural auxiliary; abs = absolutive; all = allative; erg = ergative; in = inessive; instr = instrumental; D.sg = singular definite determiner, D.pl = plural definite determiner; prog = progressive; asp = aspect; cl = classifier.

² Note that in this paper I will not be talking about the predicative uses of Basque [nominals+D] constructions. The reader is referred to Zabala (1993, 2003), Artiagoitia (1997, 2012), Eguren (2006, 2012); cf. also Etxeberria (in prep).

appears not to be shared by all dialects of Basque, and in Souletin, the most eastern dialect of Basque, spoken in the area of Zuberoa (a dialect which is considered to be an older version of Basque; cf. Michelena 1964, Camino to appear),³ BNs are accepted, but only in some very specific syntactic positions, as we will see below (cf. also Lafon 1954, 1970, Michelena 1987, Coyos 1999, Casenave-Harigile 2006, Etxebarne 2006, Etxegorri 2013, Manterola 2006, 2008). And this is exactly one of the main goals of this paper, to make a thorough description of the differences between the use of Basque nominal expressions (in argument position) in both Standard Basque and the Basque dialect from Zuberoa.

Before I continue, a clarification is in order here: the division that I make is between Souletin, which is the most eastern dialect of Basque, spoken in the area of Zuberoa (in the French part of the Basque Country; cf. Figure 1, where this area is highlighted by a circle), and the rest of the Basque dialects plus Standard Basque. Thus, when I use the term Standard Basque throughout this paper, I will be making reference to Standard Basque plus the rest of Basque dialects, except for Souletin. By this, I do not mean to say that the behaviour of the group that I call Standard Basque is parallel in all respects, but when it comes to the use of nominals in argument position, their behaviour can be said to be similar (cf. Manterola 2008).

Figure 1: Map of Basque Dialects (Zuazo 2008); highlights added by me.



The paper is organized as follows: in section 2 I present the way in which the definite determiner behaves in Standard Basque, a language where nominals in argument position cannot appear bare, i.e. without the presence of the definite determiner, an indefinite determiner, or a quantifier. Section 3 concentrates on showing the behavior of nominals in Souletin dialect, where nominals can appear bare and be arguments but only in some very specific syntactic positions, in direct object position. I argue that BNs in Souletin project a full DP with an empty D position occupied by a phonetically null D (cf. Contreras 1986, Longobardi 1994, 2001, a.o.), which provides an indefinite interpretation with narrow scope and is unspecified for number. In section 4 it is argued that BNs in Souletin, and in Basque in

³ The Basque determiner article historically derived from the distal demonstrative (cf. Azkue 1905, Mitxelena 1979, Irigoien 1981, Azkarate & Altuna 2001, Etxebarria 2005, Manterola 2012, in prep). Due to space considerations, I will not be addressing the idea that Souletin Basque is an older version of Standard Basque; cf. Michelena (1964), Camino (to appear), a.o. for extensive discussion on this. The reader is referred to Manterola (2012), where the historical development of the Basque D is presented.

general, are unspecified for number or number neutral in that they can be used to refer to an atom or to a sum thereof and that their semantic type is e, t , i.e. a predicate denoting set, as they cannot appear bare in subject position and are only allowed in direct object position with absolutive case (in Souletin dialect). In section 5, I argue that the reason why Standard Basque begins to use the definite article [-a(k)] to express existential interpretation with narrow scope is due to a semantic weakening of the Souletin null D and an eventual loss. This loss forces the overt D of Standard Basque—a semantically flexible element—to be used in (some specific) indefinite positions. Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. Nominals and the definite determiner in Standard Basque

The Basque definite determiner (D) is a bound morpheme that takes the phonetic forms [-a] (when singular) and [-ak] (when plural).⁴

- | | | | | |
|-----|----|-----------|----|------------|
| (1) | a. | mutil-a | b. | mutil-ak |
| | | boy-D.sg | | boy-D.pl |
| | | ‘the boy’ | | ‘the boys’ |

The article appears in the final position of the nominal phrase, attached to the noun as in the example in (1) or attached to an adjective (the last one in the adjectival string), as shown in the examples in (2).

- | | | |
|-----|----|----------------------------|
| (2) | a. | liburu urdin-a |
| | | book blue-D.sg |
| | | ‘the blue book’ |
| | b. | liburu urdin txiki-a |
| | | book blue small-D.sg |
| | | ‘the small blue book’ |
| | c. | liburu urdin txiki polit-a |
| | | book blue small nice-D.sg |
| | | ‘the nice small blue book’ |

These two properties of the Basque D apply to all dialects. Now, there are some other properties of the use of D in argumental nominal expressions that show dialectal variation. First, we will concentrate on the use of the D in Standard Basque, and then we will move on to Souletin data. As we mentioned in the introduction, it’s been assumed (cf. Laka 1993, Artiagoitia 1997, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2012, Etxeberria 2005, 2006, 2010, 2012a, among many others) that BNs cannot be used in argument position in Standard Basque and that the use of the definite article is necessary if sentences are going to be grammatical (the presence of the indefinite article or a weak quantifier also makes the sentence grammatical; for lack of space we don’t provide example here; cf. Etxeberria 2005, 2008, 2012a). This is actually one of the most characteristic properties of the Basque definite article [-a(k)] in Standard Basque.

⁴ Some authors argue that the plural form of the Basque D [-ak] is a single element (cf. Goenaga 1980, 1991, Euskaltzaindia 1993, Artiagoitia 1997, 1998, 2002, 2004, 2012, Rodríguez 2003, Trask 2003). Based on Etxeberria (2005, 2010), I assume that singular and plural markers and D are base-generated in different syntactic position, although I won’t be providing arguments for it, the reader is referred to Etxeberria (2005, 2010); see also Eguren, 2006. However, for ease of exposition, I will refer to [-a] and [-ak] as the singular and the plural D respectively.

Subject position:

- (3) a. Irakasle*(-a) berandu etorri zen.
teacher-D.sg late come aux
'The teacher came late'
b. Irakasle*(-ak) berandu etorri ziren.
teacher-D.pl late come aux
'The teachers came late'

Direct Object position:

- (4) a. Ane-k baloi*(-a) hartu zuen.
Ane.erg ball-D.sg take aux
'Ane took the ball'
b. Ane-k baloi*(-ak) hartu zituen.
Ane.erg ball-D.pl take aux
'Ane took (the) balls'

If BNs cannot appear in argument position in Standard Basque, a question that arises is how Standard Basque expresses what other languages express by means of BNs. Thus, for example, English and other Germanic languages can use bare plurals and mass terms to express the kind reading, as exemplified in (5).

- (5) a. *Fishes* appeared 390 million years ago.
b. *Silver* has the atomic number 47.

In Basque, in order to express these same kind readings, the presence of the definite determiner is necessary; the result is ungrammatical otherwise.

- (6) a. Dinosauru*(-ak) aspaldi desagertu ziren.
dinosaur-D.pl long time ago disappear aux
'Dinosaurs disappeared a long time ago'
b. Nitrogeno*(-a) ugaria da gure unibertsoan.
nitrogen-D.sg abundant is our universe.in
'Nitrogen is abundant in our universe'

In the examples in (6), the DPs *dinosauru-ak* 'dinosaur-D' and *nitrogeno-a* 'nitrogen-D' do not make reference to a specific set of dinosaurs or to a specific quantity of nitrogen, but to the species *dinosaurs* and to the species *nitrogen*. But this comes as no surprise as many other European languages also make use of the definite determiner to express the kind interpretation, e.g. Romance languages, or Greek (cf. Kleiber 1990, Krifka et al 1995, Chierchia 1998b, Zamparelli 1998, Fara 2001, Dayal 2004, etc.). Another interpretation that BNs can obtain in languages like English (also in some Romance languages; e.g. Spanish) is the existential interpretation, (7).

- | | | |
|-----|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| (7) | English: | Spanish: |
| a. | John has eaten <i>potatoes</i> . | d. Juan ha comido <i>patatas</i> . |
| b. | <i>Moles</i> are ruining our garden. | 'Juan has eaten potatoes' |
| c. | John drank <i>wine</i> . | e. Juan ha bebido <i>vino</i> . |
| | | 'Juan has drunk wine' |

And here comes what is really interesting about the Basque definite article, because when Basque definite DPs (plurals and masses) fill the direct object slot (and only the direct object slot), the definite DP can, but need not make reference to a specific set and can obtain the so-called existential interpretation. In (8), we need not be talking about a specific set of candies or a specific quantity of wine. In fact, the emphasis of this paper will be in trying to account for this existential interpretation of the definite article (cf. section 5; cf. also Artiagoitia 1998, 2002, 2006, 2012, Eguren 2012, Etxeberria 2005, 2010, for alternative (synchronic) analyses).

- (8) a. Ane-k goxoki-ak jan zituen.
 Ane.erg candy-D.pl.abs eat aux
 ‘Ane ate (the) candies’
 b. Ane-k ardo-a edan zuen.
 Ane.erg wine-D.sg.abs drink aux
 ‘Ane drank (the) wine’

Note that in the examples in (8) the object DPs cannot denote kinds. However, a definite interpretation is possible for the object DPs in (8a-b); that is, if we were to offer English translations, (8a) and (8b) would be ambiguous between a referential and an existential interpretation: (8a) ‘Ane ate *the candies*’ or ‘Ane ate *candies*’; (8b) ‘Ane drank *the wine*’ or ‘Ane drank *wine*’.⁵

⁵ A reviewer showed her worries concerning the indefinite/existential nature of the reading we get in sentences like (8), where the [N+D] construction have been argued to get both definite and existential readings. They suggested that I should try to show that these DPs do really get an existential reading and they suggested some tests: (i) compatibility with existential constructions, (ii) possibility to appear in the object position of *have* (in particular with relational nouns), (iii) the Löbner test where you assert and deny something of a DP. There are two ways to construct existential sentences in Basque: (i) by means of a construction which makes use of something similar to the expletive subject, the element *ba-* which is attached to the copula *izan* ‘be’ (cf. Oyharçabal 1984, Etxepare 2003), (ii) by means of the so-called ‘locative-inversion’ where the coda—or the element that expresses location—is moved to initial position. In both existential constructions, the [nominal+D] construction is ungrammatical as shown by the examples in (ia,b) and (ic,d) respectively (cf. Etxeberria 2012a for extensive discussion on Basque existential sentences). In fact, the [nominal+D] construction gives ungrammatical results in all these indefiniteness tests, meaning that in these cases the existential reading is disallowed:

Existentials (cf. Etxeberria 2012 for extensive discussion on existentials):

- (i) a. *Bada gizon-a atean.
 yes-is man-D.sg door-D-at
 b. *Badira gizon-ak atean.
 yes-are man-D.pl door-D-at
 c. *Atean gizona dago.
 door-D-at man-D.sg be.egon.sg
 d. *Atean gizonak daude.
 door-D-at man-D.pl be.egon.sg

Object position of *have*:

- (ii) a. *Ane-k anai-a dauka.
 Ane-erg brother-D.sg has
 b. *Ane-k anai-ak dauzka.
 Ane-erg brother-D.pl have

The Löbner test:

- (iii) a. *Ane-k ate-a ireki du eta Ane-k ate-a itxi du.
 Ane-erg door-D.sg open aux and Ane-erg door-D.sg close aux
 b. *Ane-k ate-ak ireki ditu eta Ane-k ate-ak itxi ditu.
 Ane-erg door-D.pl open aux and Ane-erg door-D.pl close aux

Despite the ungrammaticality of the sentences above, there is no doubt that the object DPs in the sentences in (8)

One may be led to think that Standard Basque makes use of the definite determiner [-a(k)] to get the existential interpretation we are describing above due to the fact that it does not have indefinite articles. This is not correct, as Basque possesses singular and plural indefinite articles as the following examples show (cf. Etxeberria 2005, 2008, 2012a for more on this).

- (9) a. Anek goxoki bat jan zuen.
 Ane.erg candy one eat aux
 ‘Ane ate a candy’
 b. Anek goxoki batzuk jan zituen.
 Ane.erg candy some eat aux
 ‘Ane ate some candies’

It is important to note that the existential interpretation of the object DPs in the examples in (8) has obligatory narrow scope—the indefinites in the examples in (9) can get both narrow and wide scope—, as is the case with BNs in the object position in English (cf. Carlson 1977). Take the examples in (10).

- (10) a. #Nere aitag bi sator hil zituen ordubetez.
 my father.erg two mole kill aux hour-for
 ‘My father killed two moles for an hour.’
 b. Nere aitag satorr-ak hil zituen ordubetez.
 my father.erg mole-D.pl kill aux hour-for
 ‘My father killed moles for an hour.’

The sentence in (10a) can only be interpreted with the indefinite *bi sator* ‘two moles’ having wide scope over the atelic adverbial *ordubetez* ‘for an hour’, i.e. [*bi sator* > adv. *for*] and asserts that the same two moles were killed again and again; a rather strange state of affairs. The sentence in (10b), on the other hand, is completely grammatical. The reading we get is one where my father killed different moles and the existentially interpreted definite DP must necessarily take narrow scope below the adverbial *ordubetez* ‘for an hour’, i.e. [adv. *for* > *satorrak*]. It is true that the DP object of the sentence in (10b) can also get a wide scope reading, but in this case we would not be talking about the existential interpretation of this element, but its definite interpretation, something expected since these DPs in Basque are ambiguous between definite and existential readings, as we already argued, cf. (8). With the definite interpretation of *satorrak*, (10b) would be as strange a sentence as (10a).

In the next section we will concentrate in describing the behavior of nominals (in argument position) and the definite determiner in Souletin.

3. Nominals in Souletin⁶

3.1. The use of the definite determiner in Souletin

do get both a definite and an existential reading, as I have already argued. The reason why the Basque [nominal+D] construction with existential interpretation cannot appear in these sentences may be due to the fact that the main meaning of the Basque [-a(k)] is definite in nature (cf. footnote 3). However, I don’t have anything deeper to say about this right now and I will leave it for future research.

⁶ Thanks to Battittu Coyos, Oihana Larrandaburu, Marilyn Recalt, and especially Maider Bedaxagar, for help with the Souletin data.

In Souletin, the behavior of the definite determiner is that of a ‘well-behaved’ definite determiner; i.e. it forces a referential interpretation in episodic contexts no matter what syntactic position it appears in.

Subject Position:

- (11) a. Mutil-a berandu etorri zen.
 boy-D.sg.abs late come aux.sg
 ‘The boy came late.’
 b. Mutil-ak berandu etorri ziren.
 boy-D.pl.abs late come aux.pl
 ‘The boys came late.’

Direct Object Position:

- (12) a. Anek goxoki-a jan zuen.
 Ane.erg candy-D.sg.abs eat aux.sg
 ‘Ane ate the candy.’
 b. Anek goxoki-ak jan zituen.
 Ane.erg candy-D.pl.abs eat aux.pl
 ‘Ane ate **the candies**.’

From the sentences above, (12b) is the crucial example as this is the example that differs from Standard Basque. In (8a), from Standard Basque, the definite DP can get both the referential definite reading and the existential interpretation with narrow scope, in Souletin on the other hand this is not possible and *goxokiak* in (12b) can get but the referential meaning, as shown by the English translation in bold.

In kind-level contexts, the definite determiner forces a kind-level interpretation, just like in Standard Basque.

- (13) a. Lehu-ak desagertzera dira.
 lion-D.pl.abs disappear-all aux
 ‘Lions are about to disappear’
 b. Nitrojeno-a paketa da gure lürraldean.
 nitrogen-D.sg.abs abundant is our country-in
 ‘Nitrogen is abundant in our country’

3.2. Existential interpretation: Dless nominals in Souletin (are DPs)

In order to get the existential interpretation (with narrow scope) Souletin makes use of BNs, but these BNs only appear in direct object position as shown by the examples in (14) (cf. Txillardegi 1977, Coyos 1999, Casenave-Harigile 2006, Etxebarne 2006).⁷ It is important to recall that the use of BNs in argumental position is not allowed in Standard Basque and that all the examples in (14) would be ungrammatical unless the definite article is present; cf. examples (4), (8).

Direct Object position:

- (14) a. Bortüan ikusi dit behi.
 mountain.D-in see aux cow
 ‘I saw cows in the mountain’

⁷ I’m not providing here examples that show that BNs in Souletin cannot appear in subject position; I do so in subsection 3.3.

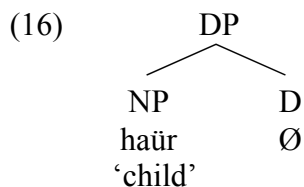
- b. Dembora da (...) içan deçadan *diru*.
time is is-have aux money
'It's time for me to have money' (Bourciez 1895)
- c. Zer agitü da? *Sagar* ebatsi dü.
what happen aux apple steal aux
'What happened? She/he stole apples'
- d. Manexek *hur* edan dizü. Peiok *ogi* jan dizü.
Manex.erg water drink aux Peio.erg bread eat aux
'Manex drank water. Peio ate bread' (Norantz)⁸
- e. Gizon batek jan dizü *gezi*
man one.erg eat aux cherry
'A man ate cherries' (Norantz)

The BNs in direct object position in the examples above all get an existential interpretation—recall that in order to get this existential interpretation Standard Basque necessarily makes use of [nominal+D] constructions, i.e. DPs, cf. (8), in Souletin on the other hand, adding a definite article results in a definite (referential) interpretation, cf. (12b). To be interpreted existentially here means that the BNs in (14) are not referring to a specific set of whatever the NP denotes; rather, they seem to be non-specific, weak indefinites, like bare plurals of other languages in this position. This paper will be arguing that BNs in Souletin are unspecified for number in that they can refer to an atom or to a sum; cf. section 4.

The fact that BNs in Souletin appear in direct object position and get an existential interpretation suggests that an analysis along the lines of Longobardi (1994, 2001) might be on the right track. And I think this is correct; in fact, in line with Longobardi's proposal, the assumptions that I will be making in order to account for Souletin BNs are the following:

- (15) (i) A null element exists if it alternates—is part of a paradigm—
with one or more phonologically realized morphemes and if each element of
the paradigm contributes a distinct semantic value
(ii) DP layer must be projected with a null D (Contreras 1986, Longobardi 1994,
2001)
(iii) The null D has a default existential interpretation (Longobardi 1994, 2001)
(iv) Syntactically, null structure is expected to be subject to licensing conditions
(e.g. to appear in object position)

These four assumptions entail the syntactic structure of Souletin BNs as in (16)—leaving aside directionality—, i.e. a full DP with an empty D head occupied by a phonetically null D.



The next subsection provides more evidence for the structure in (16) by presenting a more complete picture of the behavior of BNs in Souletin.

⁸ Thanks to Beñat Oyharçabal, Irantzu Epelde and Jasone Salaberria for sharing with me the data that they were collecting for the project *Norantz*, now available online: <http://norantz.org/web/en/bilaketa>

3.3. Evidence that Souletin BNs are syntactically DPs

(i) Impossible in subject position

One of the predictions of the proposal that Souletin BNs are full DPs with the structure in (16) is that these BNs will only be able to figure in positions which are controlled by predicates, which include object positions and exclude subject positions (for languages like e.g. Spanish, it seems that the exclusion restricts BNs to pre-verbal subject positions). This prediction is borne out since BNs are not allowed in subject position (neither with ergative nor with absolutive case)⁹—and that either the definite determiner or an indefinite quantifier is needed for the sentences to be grammatical, cf. (17a,b).¹⁰

Subject position:

- (17) a. Ergative:
- (i) *Ikaslek hori egin dü.
student.erg that.abs do aux
 - (ii) Ikasleek hori egin düe.
student-D.pl.erg that.abs do aux
'The students did that'
 - (iii) Ikasle eli batek hori egin düe.
student some.erg that.abs do aux
'Some students did that'
- b. Absolutive:
- (i) *Ikasle jin da.
student.abs come aux
 - (ii) Ikasleak jin dia.
student-D.pl.abs come aux
'The students came'
 - (iii) Ikasle eli bat jin dia.
student some come aux
'Some students came'

(ii) No kind interpretation

One other property of Souletin BNs is that they cannot be combined with kind-level predicates, and the presence of the definite article is necessary in order to make reference to the species as a whole (cf. example (13)). Considering what we said above about the null D getting a default existential interpretation, this property is expected: if null D can only get this existential interpretation, no kind reading will be available for Souletin BNs.

- (18) a. Lehu*(-ak) desagertzera dia.
lion-D.pl.abs disappear-all aux
'Lions are about to disappear'
- b. Nitrojeno*(-a) paketa da gure lürraldean.

⁹ Most of the speakers that I have interviewed do not accept BNs in subject position of unaccusatives, although some do. In this paper, I will be assuming that BNs cannot be used in subject position, however, I'd like to make it clear that more research is needed to clarify this point. It is important to note also that the analysis that will be proposed in section 5 could be maintained even if BNs were accepted in subject position of unaccusatives.

¹⁰ A reviewer asks whether there is any restriction on having non-specific noun phrases in subject position in Basque. There is not. The indefinite *eli bat* 'some' which appears in subject in the sentence in (17a-iii) can be interpreted both specifically or non-specifically, showing that the restriction on having BNs in subject position has nothing to do with their non-specific nature.

nitrogen-D.sg.abs abundant is our country-in
 ‘Nitrogen is abundant in our country’

In the object position of kind-level predicates BNs are also impossible, and in these cases too, the presence of the definite article is obligatory.

- (19) Nik errespetatzen dütüt erakasle*(-ak).
 I.erg respect.prog aux teacher-D.pl
 ‘I respect teachers’

(iii) *Narrow scope*

We mentioned in passing that BNs in Souletin cannot refer specifically to the set denoted by the NP, cf. (14), suggesting that they take obligatory narrow scope, something expected under the null D proposal. Take (20), for example, where we have the indefinite plural *eli bat* ‘some’ in direct object position. This sentence is ambiguous between (i) a ‘transparent’ interpretation where the direct object is assumed to have wide scope over the verb *want* and where it is possible to make reference to the boys denoted by the object NP and, (ii) an ‘opaque’ reading where the direct object is assumed to have narrow scope below the verb *want*. A consequence of the ‘opaque’ reading is that the sentence in (20) cannot be followed by naming the names of the boys that belong to the set of boys. These two readings are represented in (20a) and (20b) respectively.

- (20) some > want
 a. Anek pottiko eli bat nahi dizü ezagutu.
 Ane.erg boy some want aux meet
 Jon, Peru, eta Mikel.
 Jon Peru and Mikel
 ‘Ane wants to meet some boys. Jon, Peru and Mikel.’
 want > some
 b. Anek pottiko eli bat nahi dizü ezagutu.
 Ane.erg boy some want aux meet
 # Jon, Peru, eta Mikel.
 Jon Peru and Mikel
 ‘Ane wants to meet some boys. Jon, Peru and Mikel.’

This is typically the reading we get with a specific indefinite, or with an indefinite in Spanish modified by an indicative clause. The reading is *de re*. The sentence in (21), on the other hand, where we have a BN (instead of the indefinite plural we have in (20)) in direct object position, cannot get but the opaque reading. And in this reading the BN takes obligatory narrow scope and it is not possible to refer back to the members of the set denoted by the NP *pottiko* ‘boy’ by naming them.

- (21) Anek pottiko nahi dizü ezagutu. # Jon, Peru, eta Mikel.
 Ane.erg boy want aux meet Jon Peru and Mikel
 ‘Ane wants to meet boys. Jon, Peru and Mikel.’

So these BNs are really non-specific, narrow scope indefinites, equivalent to incorporated nominals in languages that would allow incorporation, e.g. Greenlandic Eskimo (van Geenhoven 1998). In a language like Basque, which does not allow noun incorporation (at

least in the constructions we are considering here),¹¹ upon loss of null D, as we will argue to be the case later, the only strategy to salvage the structure is using the next available element, which is the phonologically weak D [-a]; cf. section 5.

Take the examples in (22) now, which provide extra evidence for the fact that BNs in Souletin take obligatory narrow scope.

- (22) a. Anek hiru orenez bi sator eho dizü.
 Ane.erg three hour.instr two mole kill aux
 ‘Ane killed two moles in three hours.’
 b. *Anek hiru orenez sator eho dizü.
 Ane.erg three hour.instr mole kill aux
 ‘Ane killed moles in three hours.’

The sentence in (22a) can only be interpreted with the indefinite *bi sator* ‘two moles’ having wide scope over the telic adverbial *oren batez* ‘in an hour’, i.e. [*bi sator* > adv. *in*] and asserts that two moles were killed. In (22b), on the other hand, since the BN must necessarily take narrow scope below the telic adverbial [*sator* > adv. *in*], the result is ungrammatical.

(iv) *Null D is part of a paradigm*

As evidence for the existence of null D in Souletin, note that this dialect possesses other means to express indefinite/existential readings in direct object position: *zumait* ‘some’ in (23a), or *eli bat* ‘some’ in (23b).

- (23) a. Adixkide zumait khümitatü dizügü
 friend some invite aux
 ‘We have invited some friends’
 b. Haur eli bat ioi tützü lurrilat
 child some fall aux floor.the.to
 ‘Some children have fallen to the floor’

However, there is a difference between the existential interpretation that these indefinite quantifiers force and the one obtained by BNs in object position (cf. (20) and (21)): BNs must necessarily take narrow scope, and by extension, only get the so-called opaque reading in sentences such as (21), hence the oddness in the second sentence of the example. The weak quantifiers in (20), on the other hand, are able to obtain wide scope, and by extension the so-called transparent reading.

Recall also that in Souletin the D is needed to express the definite interpretation as well as the kind interpretation (cf. examples (11-13)). Thus, if this is the case, the null D⁰ does alternate with one or more pronounced morphemes and each of the elements in the paradigm contributes a distinct semantic value (cf. (15i)):

- a. the definite determiner [-a(k)]: definite (referential), and kind readings;
- b. *bat* ‘one’, *zumait* ‘some’, *eli bat* ‘some’: indefinite readings with wide/narrow scope;
- c. null D⁰: existential reading with narrow scope.

(v) *Souletin BNs can combine with (any) episodic predicate*

¹¹ There is discussion as to whether Basque light verb constructions of the type [N+V], e.g. *negar egin* ‘cry make’, are incorporation structures or not. I will not consider these constructions in this paper. The reader is referred to Uribe-Etxebarria (1989), Ortiz de Urbina (1989), Laka (1993), Oyharçabal (1994, 2006).

More evidence in favor of the existence of the null D head in Souletin comes from the possibility of BNs to combine with any kind of episodic predicate. BNs (with no null D) in general are assumed to not be able to combine with predicates of the type *break*—a real episodic predicate—which do not accept as internal arguments elements of type *e,t* or incorporated type elements (cf. i.a. Espinal & McNally 2011). In other words, full NPs, i.e. DPs, are usually blocked in incorporation constructions. In fact, when there is an incorporation process, there arise special semantic effects, e.g. the incorporated predicate (V+NP) designates some typical, characterizing, or generic activity. When incorporating BNs are combined with real episodic predicates the sentence is ungrammatical—or at least pragmatically odd. If the nominal expression contains a null D, as we are arguing to be the case in Souletin, no incorporation would be necessary (see above). As a consequence of this, Souletin BNs should be able to appear freely as verbal complements and would show no restriction to combine with real episodic predicates such as *break*. The prediction is borne out as the example in (24) shows.

- (24) Gaur goizeko festan, Peiok godalet hautsi dizü (Souletin)
 today morning.gen party.in Peio.erg glass break aux
 ‘In the party this morning, Peio broke glasses’

We conclude this section with a short review of what we’ve seen so far: (i) in Standard Basque BNs are completely ungrammatical; (ii) in Souletin BNs are allowed but only in certain restricted syntactic positions—i.e. direct object position—and with existential (narrow scope) interpretation.

Considering the restriction on the use of BNs in Souletin, I have proposed that syntactically BNs in Souletin are full DPs with an empty D head occupied by a phonetically null D, as expressed in (16) above (in line with Longobardi 1994, 2001).

Assuming that what we proposed above about Souletin BNs is correct, there are still a couple of questions that need to be addressed, and which we will try to answer in the following sections: (i) how can we account for the inability to use BNs in Standard Basque? (ii) are the Souletin and the Standard Basque systems related? And if they are, how are they related? But before we address these questions, one thing that we need to understand is what the denotation of BNs in Souletin, and in Basque in general, is, and this is exactly what we do in the next section.

4. The denotation of BNs in Souletin (and Standard Basque)

Observing the Souletin data in the previous section, one could think that the existential reading of BNs is necessarily related to plurality. In other words, one could be led to think that whenever we make use of a BN in Souletin, we necessarily make reference to a set with more than one member. And this does make sense considering that: (i) Spanish or English BNs (which can be interpreted existentially) always appear with the plural number marker [-s] (not mass terms); (ii) in Standard Basque, in order to obtain the existential reading we make use of the plural form of the definite article [-ak], cf. example (8) (with mass terms we would use [-a]).

However, this conclusion is not correct. What is important in the existential interpretation of the BNs (in object position) in (14) (repeated one of the example as (25) for convenience) is not whether they make reference to a singularity or to a plurality, but rather, to make non-specific reference to what the noun denotes in the real world.

- (25) Bortüan ikusi dit *behi*.
 mountain.D-in see aux cow
 ‘I saw cows in the mountain’

Thus, what we are going to argue in this paper is that BNs in Souletin, and in Basque in general—as will be shown below—, are unspecified for number or number neutral (cf. Jespersen 1924, Chierchia 1998a, Corbett 2000, Dayal 2004, Rullman & You 2006, Wilhelm 2008, etc.), that is, a BN in Basque can be used to make reference to a singularity or to a plurality (not to a kind; cf. (18-19)). Basically, what this means is that BNs in Basque denote the whole lattice (as expressed in (26) below), and that it does not matter whether they make reference to a single element, i.e. an atom, or to a plurality (cf. also Etxepare 2013 for a proposal of locational nouns in similar terms). Their semantic type will be *e,t*, i.e. a predicate denoting set, as they cannot appear bare in subject position and are only allowed in direct object position with absolutive case (in Souletin dialect).

- (26) *Denotation of a Basque BN:*
 In a context where the children are *a*, *b*, and *c*.
 [[haur]] = {*a*, *b*, *c*, *ab*, *ac*, *bc*, *abc*}

In what follows we provide evidence for this idea.

4.1. Numerals / Weak Quantifiers + BNs

In Basque (both in Souletin and Standard Basque), numerals combine directly with BNs. Thus, in (27a), the phrase *ikasle bat* ‘one student’ is semantically singular, while in the example in (27b) the phrase *hamar ikasle* ‘ten students’ is semantically plural. Yet, the noun *ikasle* ‘student’ remains completely uninflected for number in both cases.

- (27) Souletin & Standard Basque
 a. ikasle bat
 student one
 ‘one student’
 b. hamar ikasle
 ten student
 ‘ten students’

Note also that weak quantifiers such as *asko* ‘many’ or *gutxi* ‘few’ combine directly with the BN and make reference to a plurality. And here again, the BN is completely uninflected for number.¹²

- (28) Souletin & Standard Basque
 a. ikasle asko
 student many
 ‘many students’
 b. ikasle gutxi
 student few
 ‘few students’

¹² The weak quantifiers *asko* ‘many/much’ and *gutxi* ‘few/a little’ can co-occur both with count and mass terms in Basque. However, this is not important for the point that I’m trying to make here. The reader is referred to Etxeberria (2008, 2012, in prep), Etxeberria & Etxepare (2012) for more information on this.

4.2. Predicative uses of BNs

More evidence for the number neutrality of BNs in Basque comes from predicative uses of nominal expressions. In both Souletin and Standard Basque it is possible to use BNs as stage-level predicates. Thus, the same BN, *artzain* ‘shepherd’ in (29), can be used to predicate of a singularity or of a plurality.

- (29) Souletin & Standard Basque:
- a. Miren artzain joan zen Ameriketara.
Miren shepherd go aux.sg America-to
‘Miren went to America (as) shepherd’
 - b. Jon eta Miren artzain joan ziren Ameriketara.
Jon and Miren shepherd go aux.pl America-to
‘Jon and Miren went to America (as) shepherd’

In Souletin, BNs are also used to express individual-level predicates (this is not allowed in Standard Basque; cf. fn.2), and here again, a BN, *haür* ‘child’ in this case, can serve as predicate to both singular subjects such as proper names (30a) and plural subjects such as conjoined NPs (30b). Note that this predicative use of BNs is not restricted to capacity nominals (cf. de Swart, Winter, & Zwarts 2007) since *haür* ‘child’ does not denote a profession, a religion, or a nationality.

- (30) Souletin:
- a. Miren haür düzü.
Miren child is
‘Miren is a child’
 - b. Miren eta Peru haür tützü.
Miren and Peru child are
‘Miren and Peru are children’

What all the examples above come to show is that BNs in Basque are unspecified for number, and that they can make reference to a single element, i.e. an atom, or to a plurality, i.e. a sum. In other words, BNs in Basque are number neutral; that is, they contain no number specifications at all and they can make reference to any number of objects (singular or plural).

4.3. Compounding

A final piece of evidence for the number neutrality of Basque BNs comes from compounding. Take the example in (31), from Etxepare (2013: (65)), where we have a [noun+locational noun] compound:

- (31) Gizarajoa *liburu-pean* itota aurkitu genuen
poor-D.sg book-under flooded found we-had
‘We found the poor guy flooded under books’

It is true that the most salient reading of this sentence is one where we find the guy under a plurality of books, but it is not hard to make up a context where the guy is under a single, enormous, book. Imagine, for example, a situation where the guy is a collector of really big books and after an earthquake, one of this books falls on him and we find the guy under a

4.4. BNs in Basque vs. BNs in East Asian languages

(32) wo mai le *shu* (Mandarin; Jiang 2011)
I buy past book
'I bought a book/books'

To begin with, BNs in Basque cannot get the kind interpretation (cf. (13) and (18-19)), in opposition to what happens in Mandarin or in Thai.

Another important difference that plays a role in the analysis is that East Asian languages lack both indefinite and definite determiners (as opposed to what happens in Basque where we have both); therefore their bare nominals should be considerably more flexible in their interpretation. In fact, these East Asian languages can use BNs to express the definite interpretation,¹³ something that is not possible in Souletin unless the D is inserted, (35c); cf. also (11-12).

(35) a. *gou yao guo malu* (Mandarin)
dog want cross road
'The dog wants to cross the road'

b. *nuu khaw maa nai baan* (Thai)
rat enter come in house
'The/a rat(s) came in the house.'

c. *gizon batek jan dizü gezi* (Souletin; (14e))
man one.erg eat aux cherry

15

- √ Existential: ‘A man has eaten cherri(es)’
 * Definite: ‘A man has eaten the cherri(es)’

One other difference between the use of BNs in Basque and in East Asian languages we are considering concerns numeral quantifiers. In East Asian languages, as a general rule, numerals cannot combine directly with a BN and the presence of a classifier is necessary in order for the construction to be grammatical, as exemplified in (36).

- (36) a. wo mai san *(ben) shu (Mandarin)
I buy three Cl book
'I bought three books'
- b. chan hen nuu saam *(tua) nai baan (Thai)
1 see rat three Cl in house
'I saw three rats in the house.'

In Basque, numerals combine directly with the nominal expression, as we already saw; cf. (27), and no classifier is needed, at least in the overt syntax.

- (37) a. bost neska
five girl
'five girls'
b. hamar lagun
ten friend
'ten friends'

Observing all these facts about BNs in Basque, we can reach the following generalizations: (i) BNs in Basque are unspecified for number and can make reference to singularities or to pluralities; (ii) BNs in Souletin cannot function as arguments of semantic type *e* (they get neither the kind meaning nor the definite meaning), as they are only licensed in direct object position with absolutive case and indefinite/existential interpretation—cf. footnote 11; and (iii) BNs in Basque are of semantic type *e, t*; i.e. a predicate denoting set.

Before we move on to the next section, recall that at the end of section 3.3 we raised two questions that were left unanswered, to know: (i) how can we account for the inability to use BNs in Standard Basque? (ii) are the Souletin and the Standard Basque systems related? And if they are, how are they related? Let me note as a partial answer to the second question that one very important assumption that I'm making is that Souletin is closer to Old Basque than the Standard Basque is concerning the nominal system as has been recently shown by Manterola (2012); cf. footnote 3.

5. From Souletin to Standard Basque

We have seen that in present-day Basque there are (at least) two systems when it comes to the use of nominal expressions in argumental position: (i) Standard Basque, and (ii) Souletin. To summarize, in Souletin BNs can appear in direct object position with existential interpretation (and with narrow scope), whereas in Standard Basque BNs cannot be used in argument position and the D is used to express definite readings, kind readings, as well as existential readings (with narrow scope).

In this situation, the question that comes to our mind is, why/how did Standard Basque (being a later stage of Basque compared to Souletin) begin to use [-a(k)] to express the existential interpretation with narrow scope? Remember that in section 4 it's been argued that BNs in Basque are number neutral and that in Souletin they are grammatical in internal argument position with existential interpretation (cf. §3.1). If this is the case, it is clear that the definite determiner does not appear to be making any semantic contribution in the existential reading—because it does not appear to be providing any kind of definiteness,¹⁴ as can be seen in the English translations provided for the sentences in (38).¹⁵

- (38) a. Anek goxoki-ak jan zituen.
 Ane.erg candy-D.pl.abs eat aux
 ‘Ane ate candies’
 b. Anek ardo-a edan zuen.
 Ane.erg wine-D.sg.abs drink aux
 ‘Ane drank wine’

Taking all this into account, I believe what motivated Standard Basque to begin to use [-a(k)]¹⁶ in order to get the existential reading (with narrow scope) is twofold: (i) loss of null D, (ii) number morphology.

5.1. Motivation 1: loss of null D

The null D of the previous stage of Basque, i.e. Souletin dialect (expressed in (16), repeated below for convenience as (39a)), becomes a very weak form semantically as it is non-referential and unspecified for number. This vagueness, i.e. indefiniteness plus number vagueness, eventually dooms this form to loss of its semantic indefinite feature and given that it is a null form, it cannot be reanalyzed and as a consequence it gets lost. The appearance of the overt D in Standard Basque in the indefinite/existential object position, thus, is a kind of reanalysis of the available form D [-a] as a D with existential interpretation (with narrow scope) in these cases.

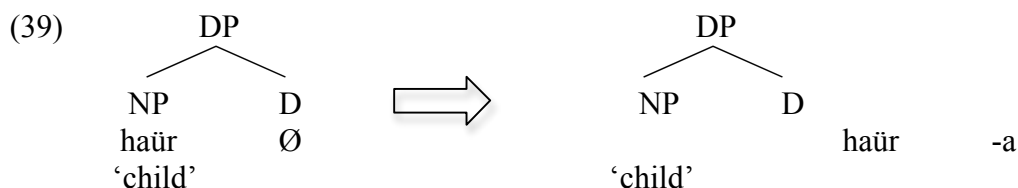
In other words, what this paper is proposing is that the available form D of Basque is reanalyzed and takes over the function of the indefinite null D (cf. Manterola 2008 for a possible grammaticisation process—à la Greenberg—of the Basque D). And in fact, this makes sense considering that the Basque definite determiner [-a] is a phonologically weak element, and as such, it appears to be the first immediate ‘proximate’ phonologically to the null D. As a consequence, Basque can be said to move from the syntactic situation described in (39a)—with a null D—to a syntactic situation where the [-a] takes the place of this null D in (39b). The need to have the D position filled is syntactic: the loss of null D. Syntactically, the definite article [-a] is always a D, but now it also functions as the overt counterpart of the (otherwise) covert indefinite existential in object position. So our proposal is that in this reading the definite article has a weak function since it applies vacuously, i.e., it will be an element of semantic type *et, et*, an element that does not change the semantic type of its argument. Thus, in this case, we have an asymmetry between syntax (need to always have functional structure above the NP in Basque, for an NP to function as an argument), and the semantics, which imposes indefinite meaning.

¹⁴ Cf. Etxeberria 2005, 2010 for a different synchronic analysis of the Basque [-a(k)].

¹⁵ Recall that the sentences in (39) can also get the definite interpretation, cf. example (8), a reading that I ignore in this case as it will not be considered in the discussion that follows.

¹⁶ [-k] is the plural number marker; cf. also Etxeberria (2005, 2010).

Thus, syntactically, the Basque article [-a] has become an element which is necessary in order to create arguments, i.e. unless [-a] is present, nominal expressions cannot be arguments (unless some other element is added, e.g. quantifier, indefinite, etc.).¹⁷



But, why don’t we see the same phenomenon in languages like Spanish, Greek, or Italian (assuming, maybe incorrectly, that these languages make also use of the null D with existential reading)? The reason, I think, why the null D in these languages doesn’t become such a weak form semantically is because it is indefinite, but specified for number, i.e. it is plural, so it not semantically as vague as the Souletin null D, which is so underspecified that it is simply a vaguer form. Interestingly, in Italian, indefinite definites seem to be allowed in some contexts, as argued by Zamparelli (2002).

- (40) a. Ogni settimana, il mio sito web viene attaccato da [gli hacker]
 ‘Every week, my site web is attacked by the hackers’
 b. Nel 1986 [i ladri] hanno svutato il mio appartamento
 ‘In 1986, the thieves emptied my apartment’

Zamparelli (2002: 316) argues that these sentences can get both a definite and an existential interpretation depending on the context they appear in.

Now, an additional function that the Basque D has been argued to possess is that of a domain restrictor—a function that D heads may perform crosslinguistically—, where D supplies the context set variable C when combined with strong quantifiers as in (41) (cf. Etxeberria 2005, 2012b, Etxeberria & Giannakidou 2010, to appear). Note that in these cases, the D applies non-canonically, as it combines with a quantifier of type *et,ett*, not with an element of type *et*, as expected.¹⁸

- (41) a. mutil guzti-**ak** (Etxeberria 2005: (37a))
 boy all-D.pl
 b. *mutil guzti; *mutil-**ak** guzti

What we have argued is that in the domain restricting function the D does not create a referential expression, but is simply a type-preserving function, i.e. a non-saturating function, a function that contributes a property.

- (42) a. [_{QP} [_{NP} *ikasle_N*] *guzti* _Q + *ak* _D]
 b. *ikasle guzti-ak* = (student) [all (C)]

¹⁷ A possible prediction of this proposal (not necessarily a *must be* one) is that Souletin will begin to use the definite article to get the existential interpretation with narrow scope in the future; and this appears to be correct, as some speakers of Souletin that I have consulted begin to use [-a(k)] in direct object position with no definite meaning, in a way parallel to the examples of (38) from Standard Basque. I’m aware that different factors (language contact, etc.) may also affect this process, but there is no reason to think that some historical processes *must* happen—e.g. the Jespersen cycle with negation—, and the one we are considering here may be another one.

¹⁸ Cf. Etxeberria (2005, 2012b), Etxeberria & Giannakidou (to appear) for arguments that prove that these constructions are not DPs of type *e*, but QPs of type *ett*.

- (43) a. $\llbracket Q \rrbracket = \lambda P \lambda Q . \forall x P(x) \rightarrow Q(x)$
 b. $\llbracket D \rrbracket = \lambda Z_{\text{et,ett}} \lambda P_{\text{et}} \lambda Q_{\text{et}} Z (P \cap C) (Q);$
 Z the relation denoted by Q
 c. $\llbracket \text{guzti-ak} \rrbracket = \lambda P \lambda Q . \forall x (P(x) \cap C(x)) \rightarrow Q(x)$

This additional use of the Basque D as a domain restrictor provides extra evidence for the fact that D is a semantically flexible element in Basque, one that encompasses classical definite uses, but also weaker functions such as the null existential and domain restriction. In other words, D in Basque is not always referential (cf. Etcheberria in prep).

5.2. Motivation 2: number morphology

A second motivation why Standard Basque starts using [-a(k)] instead of the Souletin null D comes from the fact that Basque begins to mark number morphology explicitly.¹⁹ In Souletin (and in Standard Basque, cf. section 4), BNs are number neutral and there is no morphological number on the noun itself (as is the case in Spanish or in English where plurality is marked by means of [-s]). Note that the sentence in (44) would be literary translated as: ‘I saw *cow* in the mountain’.

- (44) Bortüan ikusi dit *behi*.
 mountain-D.in see aux cow
 ‘I saw cows in the mountain’

It is important to emphasize that Basque possesses a plural marker, which is [-k]. But this plural marker cannot be applied to nouns directly as the plural marker is a suffix, and as such categorically as well as phonologically dependent on the presence of another category, in this case, the definite article [-a], so, unless the definite article is present, the plural marker cannot appear in Basque (cf. Etcheberria 2005, 2010).

- (45) a. *ikasle-k
 student-pl
 b. ikasle-a-k
 student-D-pl

Thus, the need to mark number on nouns explicitly by means of the plural marker [-k] forces the definite article [-a] to be also present.

5.3. On why the Basque definite article is on D, and not below

In section 5.1 it has been argued that the Standard Basque article [-a(k)] is a D in every context but very flexible in its ability to type-shift, a property that allows us to account for the

¹⁹ According to some authors, e.g. Irigoien (1987), Manterola (2006, 2012), the reason why Standard Basque begins to mark number explicitly by means of [-a(k)] is due to the fact that the languages around have overt plural markers, e.g. Spanish and French mark plural number on nouns by means of [-s]. This could of course be the case, however, what is left unexplained is why Souletin did not already take the same route and began to mark plural by means of [-ak], because Souletin is also in contact with French. One possibility would be to think that other languages that are in contact with Souletin, e.g. Occitan’s variant Gascon, would behave just like Souletin in possessing BNs with no number marker, i.e. no plural marker, and in allowing them only in internal argument position. However, this appears not to be correct, as Occitan and its variant Gascon do have plural morphology [-s], just like Spanish. Thanks to Francesc Roca and Xavier Lamuela for help with Occitan data.

various interpretations that it forces, e.g. the existential interpretation. In other words, the Basque article [-a(k)] is syntactically always a D while semantically is a very flexible element.

However, one could take another direction, and argue that the Basque determiner [-a(k)] in its existential interpretation is not a *determiner* but simply a (singular or plural) number marker. This is in fact a position taken by Artiagoitia (2002, 2006). Artiagoitia claims that Basque DPs have two possible structures depending on the interpretation that they will be getting. When the DP is interpreted existentially, the article will just be filling number specification of DPs; i.e., [-a/-ak] will appear in NumP head. When the DP is interpreted referentially on the other hand, [-a/-ak] must appear in D position. But this analysis is problematic:²⁰ Take example (38b), repeated here as (46) for convenience, with the mass term *ardo* ‘beer’ in object position. In this situation, as already shown, the object DP *ardoa* can obtain two interpretations: definite or existential (cf. §2).

- (46) Anek ardo-a edan zuen.
 Ane.erg wine-D.sg.abs drink aux
 √ Definite: ‘Ane drank *the wine*’
 √ Existential: ‘Ane drank *wine*’

In the existential interpretation, Artiagoitia does not treat [-a] as a D head, rather, the article would be placed in [Head, NumP] position and function as a number marker, a *singular* number marker. But, do we really want to claim that mass terms denote singulars in sentences such as (46)? Clearly, the answer to this question is negative. What this paper proposes is that mass terms are not number marked (in line with Etxeberria 2005, 2010; cf. also Delfitto & Schrotten 1991, Doetjes 1997, Dayal 2004, Krifka 2004, etc.).

One other possibility could be to argue that the Basque D has reached the final position of the grammaticisation process proposed by Greenberg (1972) (cf. also Himmelmann 2001)—expressed in (47)—, in other words, to argue that the Basque article is just a noun marker and that syntactically it would appear in a lower position, closer to the noun.

- (47) DEM → DEF.ART → SPEC.ART → NOUN MARKER

However, this proposal cannot be correct as [-a(k)] does not appear with every noun, it does not appear attached to nouns when these are combined with numerals or with weak quantifiers (something that would be expected if the article behaved as a simple noun marker).

- (49) a. bi/bost/hamar ikasle
 two/five/ten student
 ‘two/five/ten students’
 b. ikasle asko/gutxi
 student many/few
 ‘many/few students’

6. Conclusions

Assuming that Souletin is a previous stage compared to Standard Basque when it comes to the D system (as shown by Manterola 2012), it has been argued here that Basque historically

²⁰ The reader is referred to Etxeberria (2005) for extensive discussion against Artiagoitia’s (2001) analysis.

derived from a stage where BNs were allowed in internal argument position (i.e. object position) to a stage where BNs in argument position are completely ungrammatical, and the definite article is introduced to express existential interpretation with narrow scope. In support of this analysis, the paper first made a thorough description of the use of BNs, and of the use of the definite article in both Souletin (the most eastern dialect of Basque) and in Standard Basque (plus all the rest of the dialects). I also argued that in Souletin, BNs are full DPs with an empty head occupied by a phonetically null D—with indefinite reference and unspecified for number—, partly in line with Longobardi (1994, 2001). The result is an analysis of D as a semantically flexible element, one that can take up classical definite functions, but also weaker functions (indefinite—with narrow scope—, as argued here, and non-saturating domain restriction, as argued in earlier work, Ettxeberria 2005, 2012b, Ettxeberria & Giannakidou 2010, to appear).

This paper also provided evidence that BNs in Basque are number neutral (cf. Jespersen 1924, Chierchia 1998a, Corbett 2000, Dayal 2004, Rullman & You 2006, Wilhelm 2008, etc.), i.e., a BN in Basque can be used to make reference to a singularity or to a plurality.

Finally, this paper argues that the reason we move from a system like Souletin to a system where BNs are not allowed, i.e. Standard Basque, is basically due to a semantic weakening and loss of the null D: (i) in Souletin BNs are full DPs with an empty head occupied by a phonetically null D—with indefinite reference and unspecified for number—; (ii) this null D loses its semantic features and since it is null it cannot be reanalyzed and gets lost; (iii) in Standard Basque the definite article [-a] is reanalyzed and takes the place of the null D and begins to acquire the function of the lost null D.

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