



# Definiteness and Indefiniteness A Comparative Perspective on Finnish and Italian

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## *Abstract*

The article focuses on one of the crucial aspects that differentiates Italian and Finnish: the way to express definiteness and indefiniteness. Italian is a typical article-language whereas Finnish has no such means to convey definiteness or indefiniteness, but other linguistic strategies can be optionally used. After presenting the main characteristics of Italian and Finnish we will discuss which can be the challenges in translation and for language learners.

*Keywords:* Articles, Definiteness, Finnish-Italian, Specificity, Translation

## *Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

One of the linguistic features for which we can divide languages in the world is to have or not a formal system that indicates the definiteness, indefiniteness or specificity of a noun through elements that are visible in the superficial structure of the language, such as an article system or definite affixes.<sup>2</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the collection of papers *Conflict and contrast in language and literature* by presenting one of the linguistic structures crucially differentiating Finnish and Italian, namely the expression of definiteness. For the fact of being myself in a constant language contact situation in my daily life at home as well as at work, I believe that the “conflict” is only apparent and can be rather turned into an enriching and fruitful dialogue, of which this work aims to be part. If not otherwise quoted the examples are mine. The following abbreviations are adopted: F feminine, M masculine, PAST past tense, NOM nominative, GEN genitive, PART partitive, ACC accusative, INE inessive, ELA elative, ALL allative, ADE adessive, CVB converbs (see Ylikoski 2022), PASS passive.

<sup>2</sup> In WALS (The World Atlas of Languages Structures) a broader use of the term “definite article” is made, which includes, in addition to definite articles, affixes on nouns that code definiteness; and demonstratives, if those demonstratives are used as markers of definiteness (Dryer 2013).

core concepts of definiteness and indefiniteness have been broadly discussed in all domains of linguistics since the beginning of last century and the philosophical works of Russel. It is not easy to provide an uncontroversial definition or to discuss them in an exhaustive way, and a wider discussion on the topic is beyond the scope of this study.

Given that the semantic-conceptual notion of definiteness is common to human languages we know that languages can have several ways to convey it of which the most common is an article-system. Other means to code definiteness in addition to lexical elements (determiners) such as articles or affixes attached to the noun can be, for example, morphology, word order, stress, and discourse context. We can define as an article a word that is strictly related to a noun, the head noun. It introduces the head noun and interacts with the semantic property of referentiality. Articles can be broadly classified in definites, indefinites and implicits. The class of determiners do not consist in articles only but can include demonstrative pronouns, possessives, and quantifiers. In this article we will abstract away from possessives and quantifiers. In languages in which gender and number are codified, the determiner agrees for these features with the head noun:

- (1) a. la casa  
       the.Fsg house  
       ‘The house’  
    b. le case  
       the.Fpl house.pl  
       ‘The houses’

Definiteness, which could be expressed by the use of a definite article in an article-language, presupposes the existence and the unicity of the noun to which it refers. In addition, it implies that the referent has been previously introduced in the discourse and that it is familiar to the speaker and to the hearer (on the basis of the familiarity theory as proposed in Heim 1982). According to Löbner (1985 and 2010) the definite article can be related to two different kinds of definiteness: pragmatic and semantic definiteness (semantic and pragmatic unicity in Gerland and Horn 2015). On the one hand, pragmatic definiteness, or uniqueness, is dependent on specific situations and on the context, and it implies the existence of an unambiguous referent.

- (2) il libro che hai comprato ieri  
       the.M book that you buy.PAST yesterday  
       ‘The book that you bought yesterday.’

On the other hand, semantic definiteness, or uniqueness, means that the referent is established independently from the discourse context of the illocutionary act, and that it is inherently unique:<sup>3</sup>

- (3) a. il sole  
       the.M sun  
       ‘The sun’  
    b. il papa  
       the.M pope  
       ‘The Pope’

<sup>3</sup>Nominals of the type in (2) are defined “individual nouns” in Löbner (2010).

Even though indefiniteness may not be merely defined as opposite to definiteness, the indefinite article is generally considered as contraposed to the definite one as it introduces a referent that has not been yet mentioned in the discourse. The indefinite article is generally considered in contraposition to the definite one as it introduces a referent that has not been yet mentioned in the discourse. The indefinite article interacts with specificity and it can thus receive an indefinite non-specific interpretation when the referent is unknown to both the speaker and the hearer, as in (4)a, or an indefinite specific reading when the referent is known to the speaker but unknown to the hearer, as in (4)b.

- (4) a. Vorrei leggere un libro di astronomia. [- spec]  
 would.1sg read a.M book of astronomy  
 'I would like to read a book of astronomy.'
- b. Ho comprato un libro a mia sorella. [+ spec]  
 buy.PAST1sg a.M book to my.F sister  
 'I bought a book to my sister.'

We also recall that there exist several kinds of indefinite nominals on the basis of the different combinations of presupposition and existence values (see Milsark 1977; Diesing 1992; Abbot 2004; among others).

Articles are mostly present in Indo-European and Semitic languages. Geographically, definite articles are observed in Europe, in a wide belt across central Africa from west to east, in the Pacific, and in Mesoamerica, and are relatively infrequent in other parts of the world (Dryer 2013). Among Uralic languages only Hungarian has a completely grammaticalized system of definite and indefinite articles (Skribnik and Laakso 2022, 529). Definiteness can be conveyed through other linguistic means such as possessives<sup>4</sup> (for example in Samoyedic and Permic languages), by subject case marking (e.g. nominative/partitive case alternation), object case marking (e.g. accusative/partitive case alternation), by the anaphoric use of demonstrative pronouns (as in Balto-Finnic languages), person number in verb conjugation (singular vs. plural), word order (see Itkonen 1966; Hakulinen 1968; Chesterman 1991 and Yurayong 2020).<sup>5</sup> We will see in section 2 in more details which resources are available in Finnish to convey definiteness and indefiniteness.

Coming to the present work, one of the several features for which Italian and Finnish differentiate is the way to express definiteness and indefiniteness. On the one side, Italian has an article system in which articles are grouped by definiteness and there are definite, indefinite and null articles (depending on the morpho-syntactic and semantic properties of the noun and on the syntactic configuration), as we will see in the next section. On the other side, standard Finnish lacks an article system, and it is possible to adopt other strategies to convey definiteness or indefiniteness. In colloquial Finnish the situation is more controversial as it seems that there is an ongoing grammaticalization process, in other words the demonstrative pronoun *se* is moving from a purely demonstrative use (deictic) to an anaphoric use.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup>The use of a possessive form is possible for relational nouns (body parts, kinship terms) in article-languages too, as exemplified in (i)-(ii) for English and Italian (adapted from Löbner 1985):

- (i) He stepped with his right foot.  
 (ii) Fece un passo con il (\*suo) piede destro.

<sup>5</sup>Mordvin seems to have a peculiar status among Uralic languages because it has a double nominal inflection, a definite and an indefinite one. The definite declension consists in an enclitic affix that attaches to the head noun (Hajdú 1983; Lyons 1999; and more recently Hamari and Ajanki 2022).

<sup>6</sup>With the term grammaticalization we intend the morphosyntactic reanalysis through which a lexical element

These facts pose non-trivial challenges in contexts, such as translation and language learning, in which two different languages are in contact and have to interact. In what follows we will first briefly describe the expression of definiteness in Italian (section 1) and Finnish (section 2) in order to have a better understanding of why this aspect can be a locus of difficulty, or “linguistic conflict” in broad sense, for the language learner or in the translation process. Then in section 3 we will discuss some translation examples from a Finnish novel in light of the differences between Italian and Finnish. Section 4 presents how the issue can be a locus of difficulty for language learners. Finally, section *Conclusions* resumes the discussion and concludes the paper.

### 1. Italian: the expression of definiteness and indefiniteness

Italian language presents a complete paradigm of definite and indefinite articles that agree with the head noun in gender and number. There also are allophonic variants that are sensitive to morpho-phonological factors. In general, countable nouns in argument position (as subject, object, object of a preposition) have to be preceded by a determiner, as exemplified in (5)-(7).

- (5) [(*\*Il*) giudice] è entrato in aula.  
 (*\*the*) judge) is entered in the courtroom  
 ‘The judge has entered the courtroom.’
- (6) Gianni ha letto [(*\*il*) libro].  
 Johh has read (*\*the*) book  
 ‘John has read the book.’
- (7) Lisa va a correre [con (*\*il*) cane].  
 Lisa goes to run with (*\*the*) dog  
 ‘Lisa goes running with the dog.’

The possibility of having a null determiner is related to morpho-syntactic and semantic properties of the nominal, such as the distinction between singular and plural, (8)a-b, the distinction between countable and mass nouns, (9)a-b, and syntactic configuration, for example the possibility to have a postverbal subject without a determiner, as exemplified in (10)a-b.

- (8) a. Ho mangiato una mela.  
 ‘I ate an apple’  
 b. Ho mangiato mele.  
 ‘I ate apples’
- (9) a. Ho bevuto un liquore.  
 ‘I drank a liquor’  
 b. Ho bevuto vino.  
 ‘I drank wine’

has semantically bleached and acquires new grammatical functions (see Meillet 1912; Hopper and Traugott 1993; Lehmann 2002 and Yurayong 2020).

- (10) a. Gli/degli studenti finlandesi sono arrivati.  
 ‘the/some Finnish students have arrived’  
 b. Sono arrivati (gli/degli) studenti finlandesi.  
 ‘have arrived (the/some) Finnish students’

Whereas specificity could not be lexically nor morphologically conveyed in Italian, definiteness is generally expressed through the definite articles *il, lo, la, l’*, in the singular, and *i, gli, le*, in the plural. The expression of indefiniteness is more articulated, and the indefinite article is not the only way to convey indefiniteness in Italian. As a matter of fact, several means are available (see for example Cardinaletti and Giusti 2018 and 2020): the indefinite articles *un, uno, una, un’*, that are used with countable nouns in the singular, with the so-called partitive *di* ‘of’ (*del, della, dei, degli*) (Chierchia 1997; Zamparelli 2008; Cardinaletti and Giusti 2016), and the null determiner with singular mass nouns and plural count nouns (Longobardi 1994), as exemplified in (11)a-d.<sup>7</sup>

- (11) a. Ho letto [[un libro] di linguistica].  
 ‘I read a book of linguistics’  
 b. Ho letto [[dei libri] di linguistica].  
 ‘I read some books of linguistics’  
 c. Nora beve [tè] a cena.  
 ‘Nora drinks tea for dinner’  
 d. Nora legge [[libri] di linguistica] ogni giorno.  
 ‘Nora reads books of linguistics every day’

As a final note it is worth mentioning that in Italian as well as in other Indo-European languages, articles result from a grammaticalization process,<sup>8</sup> and that it is common for a demonstrative pronoun to grammaticalize into an article, as schematized in (12):

(12)

|                                     | LATIN             |   | ITALIAN | FRENCH  |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------|---|---------|---------|
| DEMONSTRATIVE > DEF. ARTICLE        | ille, illa, illud | > | il, la  | le, la  |
| NUMERAL <i>UNO</i> > INDEF. ARTICLE | unus, una, unum   | > | un, una | un, une |

## 2. Finnish: the expression of definiteness and indefiniteness

Finnish is an agglutinative language with a rich nominal and verbal inflectional morphology. The nominal inflectional system consists of 15 cases, four of them being grammatical (or

<sup>7</sup> See also Cardinaletti and Giusti (2018 and 2020) for discussion on the use of the definite article in indefinite contexts.

<sup>8</sup> With “grammaticalization” we refer to the phenomenon through which free forms gradually lose phonological autonomy and lexical meaning until becoming forms with a grammatical value only (e.g. becoming suffixes). During grammaticalization the element in this process undergoes to phonetic erosion, morphologic reduction, semantic change and obligatoriness (see the insightful discussion in Lehmann 2002 among others).

structural) cases (nominative, genitive, partitive, accusative,<sup>9</sup> see Kiparsky 2001; Vainikka 1993 and Brattico 2012). Nominals are thus inflected for case and number, but there are neither gender features nor definite or indefinite articles. In the noun phrase the modifiers of the head-noun always precede it and agree with it in case and number.

- (13) Jussi ajaa vanhalla punaisella autolla (\*punainen)  
 Jussi drives old-ADE red.ADE car.ADE (\*red)  
 ‘Jussi drives with an old red car’

The rigid word order within the noun phrase contrasts with the constituent order that we observe in the clause: here the constituents can move quite “freely” and different word orders are possible (see Vilkuna 1989 and Laakso 2022). As said, Finnish lacks an article system marking definiteness or specificity but a nominal can be given a definite or indefinite interpretation through other linguistic strategies such as: case alternation, word order, and the use of some pronominal markers (Chesterman 1991; Laury 1991 and 1995).

### 2.1 Case alternation

Finnish rich inflectional morphology allows to use case alternation as a resource to provide different meanings. Definiteness can be expressed, for example, by the alternation of nominative and partitive plural for subjects of intransitive verbs, as exemplified in (14)a-b. Note that also the number of the predicate changes (see Larjavaara 2019 for an extensive presentation of partitive case).

- (14) a. Opiskelijat kävelivät kadulla.  
 student-NOMpl walk-PAST3pl street-ADEsg  
 ‘The students walked on the street’  
 b. Opiskelijoita käveli kadulla.  
 student-PARTpl walk-PAST3sg street-ADEsg  
 ‘(Some) students walked on the street’

The sentence in (14)a is interpreted as more definite with respect to (14)b where the use of partitive case is related to an indefinite number of students and to an indefinite group of students (I don’t know which students). The sentence in (14)b is even more natural if the use of partitive case interacts with constituent order giving the existential sentence in (15):

- (15) Kadulla käveli opiskelijoita.  
 street-ADEsg walk-PAST3sg student-PARTpl  
 ‘There were (some) students walking on the street.’

In singular this alternation is not possible, (16)a-b. In this case, only constituent order is available to give a [+def] or [-def] interpretation of the DP (see section 2.2).

<sup>9</sup>As pointed out by a reviewer, nowadays it is more common to neglect accusative (see Iso Suomen Kielioppi § 1226, § 1233). We however follow the traditional classification of cases based on the functional (syntactic) role. See also Larjavaara (2019) for the suggestion to use *totalitiivi* ‘totalitive’.

- (16) a. Opiskelija käveli kadulla.  
 student-NOMsg walk-PAST3sg street-ADEsg  
 ‘The student walked on the street.’  
 b. \*Opiskelijaa käveli kadulla.  
 student-PARTsg walk-PAST3sg street-ADEsg

As we can observe from the examples above (and their English counterparts) in Finnish partitive case can be used with plural subjects to indicate an indefinite, or unknown, set of referents, as in (14)b and (15). Turning to the object of the clause, the situation is not that straightforward. As a matter of fact, partitive case can be used under different circumstances: to refer to “an unbounded quantity of a certain referent” (Luraghi and Kittilä 2014, 18), when the event is atelic, with negation, with partitive assigning verbs and with numerals. Leaving aside the last two cases, which will not be discussed here, it is widely accepted that partitive case is thus always related to, broadly said, incompleteness, either of the object itself or of the event. However, accusative case cannot be considered as its counterpart in terms of completeness or definiteness. In fact, a singular accusative object can still be ambiguous in its [+def] or [-def] interpretation in a sentence without a discourse context such as (17)a. The partitive object in (17)b can be “incomplete” at two levels, referential/quantificational or aspectual: in the first case “I read a part of a/the book”, whereas in the second case “I was reading a/the book”. In both cases the noun *kirja* “book” is specific (the speaker but not the hearer knows which book) but ambiguous between a definite or an indefinite reading.

- (17) a. Eilen luin kirjan.  
 yesterday read.PAST1sg book.ACCsg  
 ‘Yesterday I read a/the book.’  
 b. Eilen luin kirjaa.  
 yesterday read.PAST1sg book.ACCsg  
 ‘Yesterday I was reading a/the book.’

With mass nouns only partitive case is possible and indicates an unbounded quantity, (18) a. The use of accusative case is possible only with a countable use of the noun, (18)b.

- (18) a. Ostin kalaa torilta.  
 buy.PAST1sg fish.PARTsg market.ABLsg  
 ‘I bought (some) fish from the market.’  
 b. Ostin kalan torilta.  
 buy.PAST1sg fish.ACCsg market.ABLsg  
 ‘I bought a/the fish from the market.’

With plural nouns the situation is different. On the one hand, the accusative plural *kirjat* ‘books.ACCpl’ in (19)a can only be interpreted as definite (known to both the speaker and the hearer) as it refers to a known set of books. On the other hand, the partitive plural *kirjoja* ‘books.PARTpl’ in (19)b indicates a set that is indefinite at two levels, quantificational (some books) and referential (I don’t know which ones).

- (19) a. Eilen                    luin                    kirjat.  
           yesterday        read.PAST1sg    book.ACCpl  
           ‘Yesterday I read the books.’  
       b. Eilen                    luin                    kirjoja.  
           yesterday r        ead.PAST1sg    book.PARTpl  
           ‘Yesterday I read some books.’

## 2.2 Word order

As previously said, Finnish shows a quite free word order in the clause. However, the word order is highly dependent on the information structure: old information is found at the beginning of the sentence and conversely new information is at the end of the sentence. Traditionally, the first part of the sentence is known as theme whereas the second part of the sentence after the predicate is known as rheme (see Carlson 1983 and Vilkuna 1989, or *topic* and *focus* in Lambrecht 1994, as reported in ISK § 1366, § 1370, § 1371).

Thus, for what concerns definiteness, the postverbal position is preferably interpreted as [-def] whereas the preverbal position [+def].

- (20) a. Kadulla                käveli                opiskelija.                [-def]  
           street.ADEsg    walk.PAST3sg    student.NOMsg  
           ‘On the street walked a student’  
       b. Opiskelija            käveli                kadulla.                [+def]  
           student.NOMsg walk.PAST3sg    street.ADEsg  
           ‘The student walked on the street’

However, this word order alternation does not hold for the object. The object can appear in pre-verbal or postverbal position, but the preverbal position is related rather to information structure (focus) than to definiteness.

- (21) a. Kaisa                    söi                    omenan.  
           Kaisa-NOM    eat-PAST3sg    apple-ACCsg  
           ‘Kaisa ate a/the apple.’  
       b. OMENAN                Kaisa                söi.  
           apple-ACCsg    Kaisa-NOMsg    eat-PAST3sg  
           ‘An/the APPLE Kaisa ate.’

## 2.3 Optional use of pronominal markers in colloquial Finnish

Finnish makes optional use of pronominal elements for conveying definiteness, especially in the colloquial variety of language. Since 1920-30 the expression of definiteness has been a topic of much discussion among Finnish linguists (see for example the discussion carried out on the journal *Virittäjä* by among others Ahlman 1928 and 1932, Hakulinen and Nieminen 1938, see also ISK § 1409, § 1418). More recently, for example Laury (1991, 1995 and 1997) suggests that the demonstrative pronoun *se* ‘it/this’ is undergoing a process



of grammaticalization from a demonstrative pronoun to an article-like determiner.<sup>10</sup> Its distribution is naturally restricted to definite contexts and as a counterpart of it indefinite markers such as the numeral *yks(i)* ‘one/a’ and the indefinite pronouns *joku/jokin* ‘a/any/a certain’ can be used. Although it should be stressed that such devices are (still) optional and pertain to a substandard variety of the language, they are however existing markers that can be used to convey definiteness and indefiniteness. In particular, the diachronic study of Ritva Laury shows empirically that *se* is switching from a “prominence marker in the discourse” to a “discourse identifier” typical of articles (Laury 1991, 1995 and 1997). Laury takes into consideration the use of *se* in a diachronic perspective analysing three different periods: i) the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century (handwritten tales), ii) 1930-40 (registered interviews) and iii) 1970-90 (oral narratives and dialogues from the SKS<sup>11</sup> archive). Comparing the use of *se* in the three databases Laury observes a shift in its use: *se* is used for already mentioned referents in the oldest dataset, whereas in the second and third ones it can be increasingly found with referents that are new mentions but somehow identifiable in the common ground of the speaker and the hearer. In this way, Laury suggests that *se* is taking over more and more functions typical to articles and is thus moving from stage 0 to stage 1 on the well-known greenbergian three-level scale, where determiners at level 1 are used with anaphoric reference and are obligatory (Greenberg 1978 and 1991).

Example (22) from Laury’s more recent data shows the use of *se* with new referents.

- (22) Ja *se* pappi .. tuli justinsa nitte...*sen* ...*sen* .. ehtoollisen kanssa ja, ... *sen* leivän kanssa.  
and se.NOM priest.NOM came right in that moment those...se.GEN...se.GEN...Holy  
Communion.GEN with and,...se.GEN bread.GEN with  
‘and the priest.... came right in that moment with the...the... Holy Communion and  
...with the bread’

Other recent examples on a possible grammaticalization process of *se* include cases such as in (23), an excerpt from a radio program in Koskela (2011):

- (23) a. ja nyt otetaan oikein rennosti siellä kotisohvalla, otetaan *se* puhelin  
‘And now, let’s take it easy there at home on the sofa, let’s take the phone’  
b. sovitetaan *sillä* puhelimella  
‘let’s call with the phone’  
c. äänestetään *sitä* omaa suosikkia  
‘let’s vote own’s favourite’

To different conclusions come Larjavaara (2001) and Juvonen (2000) who question Laury’s findings and conclude that Finnish is still far away from having a definite article. In particular, in her alternative proposal Juvonen (2000), supported by Larjavaara (2001), suggests that the demonstrative *se* has no more article-like characteristics than other demonstrative pronouns in Finnish. It is never obligatory and in addition, there are no visible change in morphological or phonological aspects (see also ISK, § 1418).

<sup>10</sup> Something similar is observable in Estonian, a close-related language, where the demonstrative pronoun *see* can be used as a marker of definiteness and is sporadically found also with first-mention referents, even though it is not obligatory in any context and is different from Finnish *se* in many aspects (Pajusalu 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, the Association for Finnish literature.

In a more recent study Koller analyses seven hours of free conversation from TV and radio programmes and concludes that *se* is used with NPs that fall at least in five of the following six characterizations (2010, 22):

- a. NPs are prosodically marked
- b. NPs are expressions of hesitation (or appear in the same sentence)
- c. NPs are in the rheme of the sentence
- d. NPs are rather objects, adverbials, or predicates than subjects
- e. NPs are abstract nouns
- f. NPs contain an individualising adjective.

We know that the change of the syntactic context where it occurs is crucial for the development of a demonstrative into an article-like element (Diessel 1999). Even if the use of determiners can also be observed in first-mention contexts, they are never compulsory. In addition, their use is possible when the referent, even if not previously mentioned, is familiar to the participants (shared knowledge) or otherwise is part of a common ground (see Laury 1997 and Koller 2010). Hence, we agree that considering Greenberg's universals, Finnish *se* cannot be yet considered even at stage I, as has been formerly suggested in Laury's work. This holds true also for indefinite markers such as the numeral *yks(i)* 'one' which can be ambiguous between a "pure" numeral reading and an indefinite marker, as in (24).

Context: the speaker is telling about a walk in the forest.

- (24) a. ...näin                      poron...  
           saw.PAST1sg a    reindeer.ACC  
           'I saw a reindeer'
- b. näin                      yhden                      poron  
           saw.PAST1sg    one.ACC                      reindeer.ACC  
           'I saw a reindeer (only one and not two)'

It is well known that the change in use of the numeral *one* to a marker of indefiniteness is common to many languages (also for the Hungarian indefinite article *egy* 'one'). More specifically, Hakulinen *et al.* (2004) identify two sets of indefinite pronominal markers on the basis of specificity: indefinite specific markers (*yksi, eräs, muuan, tietty* that can all be broadly translated as 'a certain') that are used when only the speaker knows the referent, and indefinite non-specific markers (*joku, jokin* 'a/any' when the referent is unknown to both the speaker and the hearer. In a parallel way to definite markers, these pronominal markers too are always optional.

- (25) a. Minä                      näin    yhden/erään                      opiskelijan.  
           I see.PAST1sg    one.ACC                      student.ACC  
           'I saw a (certain) student.'                      (specific)
- b. Minä                      näin                      jonkin                      opiskelijan.  
           I see.PAST1sg    certain.ACC                      student.ACC  
           'I saw a student.'                      (non specific)

Concluding this section on the different ways to convey definiteness in Finnish, the "definiteness hierarchy" proposed in Chesterman (1991, 159) seems interesting. The author points out that the (optional) strategies available in Finnish to mark definiteness can be seen on the

following scale, where discourse context is the strongest and word order the weakest way to disambiguate definite and indefinite NPs:

- i. Context
- ii. Partitive of quantity
- iii. Intrinsically definite nouns (e.g. sun, moon)
- iv. Function words (e.g. *se, yksi, joku/jokin*)
- v. Word order

Context occupies the topmost position of the hierarchy, and it is decisive in the interpretation of the [ $\pm$  definite] and [ $\pm$  specific] features of a nominal and it will prevail over other strategies occurring lower in the hierarchy. It is followed by the partitive of quantity and then by intrinsically definite nouns, namely nouns that are unique and definite such as, for example the sun/the moon. Down the hierarchy there are function words (“pronominal markers” in our terms), lastly followed by word order as the weakest way, according to Chesterman, to convey [ $\pm$  definite] and [ $\pm$  specific] features.

As observed above, marking definiteness and indefiniteness in an article-less language such as Finnish can be done through different linguistic strategies, but there is no such a univocal system devoted to it such as in an article-language and the interaction of different features (referentiality, quantity) is quite complex. In a language contact situation such as translation or a foreign language classroom the translator (or the learner) finds herself/himself in a persistent conflictual situation, in a broad sense of the term. Translation can be considered as a continuous negotiation between the target language and the source language in which the decision-making process is constant (see Eco 2003 among others). In fact, focusing on definiteness marking strategies, the translator needs to make constantly decisions on how to translate NPs without an article into an article-language. In what follows we present excerpts from two Finnish books translated into Italian and we will discuss the translational choices in light of the characteristics of Finnish and Italian presented above.

### 3. *Challenges in translation*

In this section we discuss some relevant examples from the original Finnish novel *Kissani Jugoslavia* (2014) by Pajtim Statovci and its translation into Italian, *L'ultimo parallelo dell'anima*, by Nicola Rainó.<sup>12</sup> We aim at observing how definiteness and indefiniteness are interpreted and translated focusing in particular on the following questions: (i) which morpho-syntactic means are used in Finnish with [+def] and [-def] NPs? (ii) Which kind of determiners are used in the Italian translation of bare NPs? The following examples are meaningful in light of the differences between Finnish and Italian discussed in the previous sections as for the expression of (in)definiteness and exemplify possible *loci* of difficulty in the process of translation.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The following abbreviations will be used: *Kissani Jugoslavia* (KJ), *L'ultimo parallelo dell'anima* (UPA). The English translations of the examples are mine when not otherwise indicated.

<sup>13</sup> What follows should not be intended in any way as a critic towards the Italian translation. On the contrary, it aims at highlighting the possible difficulties that may emerge in the translation process in this specific aspect, the expression of definiteness and indefiniteness.

- (26) a. **lakanat** olivat kostuneet hiestä (KJ, 15)  
sheet.NOMpl were damp weat.ELAsg  
b. **le lenzuola** erano madide di sudore (UPA, 12)  
'The sheets were damp with sweat.'<sup>14</sup>
- (27) a. kun menin keittiöön panemaan **vedenkeittimen** päälle (KJ, 16)  
while went.1sg kitchen.ILL put.CVB.ILL electric kettle.ACCsg on  
b. mentre io andavo in cucina ad accendere **il bollitore** (UPA, 13)  
'While I was going in the kitchen to put the electric kettle on'
- (28) a. nostin tiskipöydälle **kahvimukin** (KJ, 16)  
put.1sg sink.ALL mug.ACCsg  
b. posai sul lavello **il tazzone** (UPA, 13)  
'I put on the sink a/the mug'

In (26) the nominative subject is translated with a definite NP. Definiteness is conveyed by the context as, even if not previously mentioned in the discourse, the sheets are usually part of a bedroom.

In (27)-(28) an accusative object is translated with a definite NP in Italian. Again, definiteness is given by the discourse context: in (27) it is generally expected that in a house there is just one electric water boiler. In (28) in Finnish the object *kahvimukin* 'mug.ACCsg' is ambiguous between a definite and an indefinite reading (as reported in the English translation). The translator makes a choice assuming, by the context, that a single young man has one mug (or that it refers to his favourite/daily used mug).

- (29) a. Oatko **kahvia**? (KJ, 15)  
take.2sg coffee.PARTsg  
b. Vuoi del caffè? (UPA, 15)  
'Do you want (some) coffee?'
- (30) a. [...] sekoitin **kahvin** tasaiseksi [...] (KJ, 15)  
melt.PAST1sg coffee.ACCsg uniformly  
b. [...] mescolai come si deve **il caffè** [...] (UPA, 15)  
'I melt the coffee uniformly'

In (29) the noun *kahvi* 'coffee' has a mass denotation, requiring hence partitive case, and in the continuous of the discourse, (30), it has become familiar and turns to a countable denotation as it is the coffee in the mug, and it is thus assigned accusative case.

- (31) a. [...] yritin tarttua häntä **kädestä** (KJ, 12)  
tried.1sg catch he.PART hand.ELAsg  
b. [...] tentai di afferrarlo per **la mano** (UPA, 10)  
(litt.) 'I tried to catch him from the hand (his hand)'

<sup>14</sup> The English translations of the examples are mine and are based on the Finnish original text.

- (32) a. **hänen komeakulmaiset kasvonsa** työntyivät kaulahuivin ja takinkauluksen takaa (KJ, 12)  
 he.GEN beautiful.sharp face.Px3sg came out scarf.GEN and jacket.collar.GEN behind  
 b. **il viso spigoloso** emergeva con tale grazia dalla sciarpa e dal bavero della giacca (UPA, 10)  
 ‘His beautifully sharp face came out from the scarf and from the jacket collar’
- (33) a. [...] ne myötäilivät **hänen jalkojaan** kuin sukkahousut. (KJ, 12)  
 they shape.PAST3pl he.GEN leg.PARTpl.Px3 as tights  
 b. [...] gli sagomavano **le gambe** come dei collant. (UPA, 10)  
 ‘They shaped his legs as (they were) tights.’

With inalienable possession such as body parts, the use of definiteness marking strategies is not necessary in Finnish and definiteness is conveyed by the nature of possession itself independently of possessive pronouns, as we see in examples (31)-(33).

As we have seen in 2.1 case alternation, and namely the alternation of nominative and partitive for the subject, and accusative and partitive for the object, can be a mean used to convey indefiniteness.

- (34) a. [...] että olisit kertonut itsestäsi **pelkkiä valheita**. (KJ, 2)  
 that have told yourself.ELA.Px2 only.PARTpl lie.PARTpl  
 b. [...] mi avessi solo detto **tante balle** sul tuo conto. (UPA, 3)  
 ‘that you would have told only lies about yourself.’
- (35) a. [...] kasvatimme itse lähes kaikkea: **salaattia, kaalia, vesimelonia, paprikoita, sipulia, purjoa, tomaatteja, kurkkuja, perunoita ja papuja**. (KJ, 24)  
 We cultivated almost everything by ourselves: salad.PARTsg, cabbage.PARTsg, watermelon.PARTsg, sweet pepper.PARTpl, onion.PARTsg, leek.PARTsg, tomato.PARTpl, cucumber.PARTpl, potato.PARTpl, bean.PARTpl  
 b. [...] vi coltivavamo praticamente tutto: **insalata, cavoli, angurie, peperoni, cipolle, porri, pomodori, cetrioli, patate e fagioli**. (UPA, 20)  
 ‘We cultivated almost everything by ourselves: salad, cabbages, watermelons, sweet peppers, onions, leek, tomatoes, cucumbers, potatoes, beans’

Partitive is also strongly related to indefinite quantification, as we can see in both (34) and (35). In (34) *valheita* ‘lies’ is indefinite non-specific (the speaker does not know which lies) and numerically indefinite. The Italian translation, where the quantifier *tante* ‘many’ is used rather than the partitive *delle*, hints to the quantificational indefinite nature of the partitive than the referential one. In (35) again both the referent and the quantity are indefinite. Here, we find partitive in singular and in plural depending on the type of noun (mass or countable), and in Italian we find indefinite nouns with a zero determiner.

- (36) a. Se tulee hyvään ja rakastavaiseen **kotiin, terrarioon** jonka mitat [...] (KJ, 12)  
 it come.PRES3sg good.ILL and loving.ILL home.ILL terrarium.ILL whose measureus.  
 NOM  
 b. Andrà in **una casa** bella e confortevole, **in un terrario** grande [...] (UPA, 7)  
 ‘It will go in a good and loving home, in a terrarium whose size [...]’

The following excerpts from the same paragraph are interesting as we can observe, in the translations, the change of reference from indefinite to definite as the box, from indefinite and unfamiliar becomes a previously mentioned and thus familiar element. The same happens for the snake. Interestingly, in Finnish this transition is not visible.

- (37) a. Itse asukas tuotiin väliaikaisessa **laatikossa** kotiinkuljetuksena [...] (KJ, 14)  
self inhabitant bring.PASS temporary.INE box.INE home-delivery.ESS  
b. Il suo abitante fu portato in **una scatola** provvisoria da un corriere [...] (UPA, 9)  
'Its inhabitant was brought in a temporary box by a courier [...]
- (38) a. kuin **laatikossa** olisi voinut olla koottava kirjahylly eikä lähes täysikasvuinen  
**kuristajakäärme** [...] (KJ, 14)  
as box.INE could have been assembled bookshelf NEG. and  
almost grown constrictor  
b. come se **nella scatola** ci fosse qualche scaffale da assemblare e non **un serpente**  
**costrittore adulto** [...] (UPA, 9)  
'As if in the box there was an assembled shelf and not an adult boa constrictor [...]
- (39) a. **Käärme** oli pitkään hiljaa ja liikkumatta. (KJ, 14)  
snake.NOM was longtime quiet and move.CVB.NEG  
b. **Il serpente** restò a lungo silenzioso e immobile. (UPA, 9)  
'The snake stayed longtime quiet and immobile.'

Finally, examples (40)-(41) show the use of *yksi* 'one' as a pure numeral. This is coherent also with the Italian translations.

- (40) a. [...] hän otti **yhden** askeleen taaksepäin [...] (KJ, 11)  
he take.PAST3sg one.ACC step.ACC backward  
b. [...] fece **un** passo all'indietro [...] (UPA, 9)  
'He took one step backward...'
- (41) a. Tilasin **yhden** suoraan kotiini. Kuningasbooan. (KJ, 19)  
order.PAST1sg one.ACC directly home.ILL.Px1sg  
b. Ne ordinai **uno** per casa mia. Un boa reale. (UPA, 16)  
'I ordered one directly to my place. A boa constrictor.'

The examples that we have reported above exemplify the structural divergence in Finnish and Italian on how to express definiteness and indefiniteness. As is suggested by the so-called definiteness hierarchy proposed in Chesterman (1991), discourse context is always crucial to disambiguate between referents that would be ambiguous in an out-of-the-blue context, and the optionality of other linguistic resources to convey definiteness is clear. Also sharing a common ground of knowledge is relevant in the process of translation (examples (26)-(27)-(28)). Examples (29)-(30) are the only case in which the switch from a mass denotation (indefinite) to a countable one (definite and specific) is expressed by case alternation in Finnish and conversely by different articles in Italian (*del - il*). The denotational change from unfamiliar to familiar may not be visible at the surface (e.g. in the morpho-syntax) in any way (examples (37)-(38)-(39)) but is nevertheless conceptually relevant, as we can see from the translations.

Finally, it may be worth noting the differences with inalienable possessives: on the one hand in Finnish possessive pronouns are used providing an “inherently definite” denotation, on the other hand in Italian only definite articles are used to convey the same interpretation of the sentences (examples (31)-(32)-(33)).

#### 4. Challenges for the language learner

The differences in the distribution of articles in Finnish and Italian can be a source of difficulty in the acquisition of both languages as a foreign language. Dal Pozzo and Matteini (2016) present results from a study in the acquisition of articles by Finnish native speakers highly proficient in Italian, inspired by the former work of Ionin, Ko and Wexler (2004). Data is collected through two tasks, an oral production task and a written preference task and the items were created on the basis of definiteness and specificity. The results show that even though overall the participants master the Italian article system, some variability persists in the oral production task. In particular, two non-target patterns emerge: i) article omission, which is observed in both definite and indefinite contexts (regardless of specificity), and ii) article misuse which is mainly observed in contexts where the features definiteness and specificity are in opposition (see Ionin, Ko and Wexler 2004 and Ionin, Zibizarreta and Philippov 2009 for similar findings). The results on article omission are also in line with previous findings. Jarvis (2002) reports that article omission is more frequently observed in definite contexts than in indefinite ones in the L2 English of Finnish native speakers. At first sight the higher rate of article omissions in definite contexts can be easily interpreted as transfer effects from the L1 Finnish. But why should omission be more frequent in definite but not in indefinite contexts? This might be explained in terms of saliency of the referent: if the reference is salient in the discourse or it is in a definite topic position, articles can be considered as “redundant” in referentially salient noun phrases (Huebner 1983; Jarvis 2002 and Trenkic 2008). Interestingly, Finnish L2 learners seem to show the following pattern:<sup>15</sup> first, the definite markers (*se* or other demonstrative pronouns) are never misused or overused nor are other strategies used. Second, the numeral/indefinite marker *yksi(i)* might be overused in contexts where it could be omitted, as exemplified in (40). Note that whenever *yksi* is used, it agrees with the noun it modifies.

- (40) a. sitten minä tulin Turussa **yksi viikolle** (sitten minä tulin Turkuun \_\_ viikoksi)  
 then I came Turku.INE one week.ALL  
 ‘Then I came to Turku for one week’  
 b. me olemme nähneet vain **yksi kerta** ( \_\_ kerran)  
 we have seen only one time  
 ‘We have seen only once’

The fact that with definite referents no one of the resources available in Finnish is used to convey definiteness, can be explained in two ways, which do not exclude each other: first of all, learners of Finnish may not have reached an adequate level of language competence to use subtler linguistic strategies requiring the interaction of several syntactic, semantic and pragmatic factors (namely, what is considered to be at interfaces in L2 literature). Then this recalls

<sup>15</sup>This is based on impressionistic data collected in several years of teaching by foreign Finnish-language learners at the University of Florence. More specifically, the material consists of Italian students’ written productions.



the results in the previous study on Finnish L2 learners of Italian: omission of determinants was more frequent in referentially salient noun phrases as the article could be felt as somehow “redundant”.

### Conclusions

This paper presented one of the aspects that may be a locus of difficulty in translation but also for language learners, namely the expression of definiteness and indefiniteness since Finnish and Italian have very different strategies to express them. If on the one hand Italian is a typical article-language that has both definite and indefinite articles and can convey definiteness and indefiniteness through them, on the other hand Finnish is an article-less language and has a number of other resources that are nevertheless always optional. However, the status of Finnish as an article-less language is not that simple. Based on extensive linguistic corpora it has been proposed that in the colloquial variety the demonstrative pronoun *se* is undergoing a grammaticalization process towards an article-like stage. The proposal has been questioned and some scholars have shown disagreements on it, but what is unconfutable is that the demonstrative *se* has recently been observed in contexts in which a “pure demonstrative” would not be allowed. Hence, in language contact situations, of which translation and L2 learning can be seen as examples, the translator as well as the language learner will have a source language with a diversified set of linguistic resources for definiteness and indefiniteness. From what will the translator/learner recognize the (in)definiteness of an NP? Are there available linguistic resources among those that are used or does the translator/learner rely only on discourse context? We observed that at least in the Finnish-to-Italian direction, context is the most relevant disambiguating factor, in line with Chesterman’s hierarchy. In the production of language learners only little variability is present, and in particular in definite contexts. What happens in the reverse Italian-to-Finnish direction needs to be investigated next.

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