

Back to D

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In this paper, I return to a debate I had at a distance with Zeljko Bošković in the years 2008-2011 when based on independent empirical facts we made similar observations about the universality of the category D, but drew opposite conclusions summarized as follows:

	Aboh	Bošković
D is a syntactic primitive	no	yes
D is parametrized	no	yes

In a series of studies investigating the universality of D, Bošković (2008, 2009, 2010) argues that the absence/presence of articles in languages correlates with very specific clausal properties of which some are summarized under table 1.

Properties	Languages without article	Languages with article
Left-branch extraction	yes	no
Adjunct extraction	yes	no
Scrambling (e.g., long distance scrambling from finite clause)	yes	no
Multiple wh-fronting	yes	no
Clitic doubling	no	yes
Transitive nominals with two genitives	no	yes
Island effect in head-initial relatives	yes	no
Majority reading of MOST	no	yes
Negative raising	no	yes

Table 1: The DP/NP parameter (adapted from Bošković 2008)

Though these properties may turn out to be areal, they indicate that the presence/absence of articles in a language depends on clausal properties rather than a parameter that regulates the pronunciation of the category D. In maintaining the traditional view that D is a primitive category, Bošković concluded that languages which lack T also lack D.

While this correlation might hold, it might turn out to be misleading. The idea that D is a primitive syntactic category subject to tense parameter is not unproblematic. Outside Romance and Germanic, the category is notoriously fuzzy, and the relation to T does not hold for all the relevant cases. Many languages of the world do not have (in)definite articles of the Indo-European type, but encode definiteness by other syntactic devices that are not expressions of D (e.g., pre- vs. post-verbal position, classifiers, modifiers, see Cheng & Sybesma 1999, Aboh 2004a, b). In Kwa, bare nouns freely occur in argument and non-argument positions, where they can be interpreted as (in)definite or generic depending on context. These ‘radical’ bare noun languages therefore seem not to require overt D, unlike modern Germanic and Romance (Aboh & DeGraff 2014). In this regard, it is interesting to note that while most modern Romance and Germanic languages have (in)definite articles, these were not present in the relevant source languages (e.g., Latin) or at earlier stages of their development (e.g., Old English). The evidence shows that D is a derivative category in these languages. Given this state of affairs, it is perfectly legitimate to ask:

- a. What conceptual motivation do we have for postulating the category D as a syntactic category (independent of clausal properties)?
- b. Why do (in)definite articles develop in some languages but not in others?

In addressing these questions, I argue that D is not a syntactic primitive, but an expression of C, which may take the form of so-called articles when it heads a nominal predicate. Under this view,

the number of phases reduces to just two (i.e, C, p), where ‘little p’ stands for predicates in general (Bowers 1991).

References

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