Indefiniteness and Specificity in Old Italian Texts

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Abstract

The present study shows the necessity to assume, in the process of nominal determiner grammaticalization, an intermediate period between the early facultative marking of important referents and fully grammaticalized article systems. In this intermediate period, especially indefinite determiners seem to be distributed in a quite clearcut way according to the specificity of the referents introduced by the respective noun phrases. Statistical evidence for this is drawn from the distribution of the indefinites *uno*, *alcuno*, *certo* and bare noun phrases in a corpus of three Old Tuscan novella collections. Specificity, understood as the semantic property of non-varying, operator independent interpretation of the variable introduced by an indefinite noun phrase, which makes a continuous anaphoric reference to the respective discourse referent possible, is conceived as a phenomenon of information organization in texts. It seems to be, at this intermediate stage of nominal determiner grammaticalization, a lexical feature of indefinites rather than an effect of syntactic or pragmatic factors.

1 INTRODUCTION

The object of this study is the marking of nominal indefiniteness in Old Italian, more precisely Old Tuscan texts, in three collections of novellas.

In this period of early Romance literacy, nominal phrases[1] can appear as bare singulars or bare plurals, but also with one or more functional elements preceding the noun. The elements discussed here will be these indefinite[2] determiners that can appear alone with a bare

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[1] I will not discuss here the status of the examined determiners as the head of a maximal projection, i.e. the 'DP-hypothesis' according to Abney (1987). For the sake of simplicity, I will call every expression containing a noun or a pronoun a NP. I will furthermore not discuss whether the indefinite elements preceding a noun belong to the same or different syntactic categories. To be able to compare their textual distribution, I only analyse the actual prenominal realizations of these elements, regardless of the fact that they can probably also appear in other positions.

[2] *Indefiniteness* is to be understood in the Heimian sense as 'novelty of discourse referents' at the semantic level of 'file cards'. The relevant interpretation rule in 'file-change semantics' in this context is the 'Extended–Novelty-Familiarity-Condition' (cf. Heim 1982: 369f). In short: [+ definite] means 'familiar with respect to the file', [− definite] 'novel with respect to the file'.

noun in a NP (_N), excluding hereby indefinite elements which are only able to appear in the second (or later) position of a NP (Det_N), like *certo* ('certain') in Modern Standard Italian (*un certo uomo*, *⋆certo uomo*). More precisely, *uno, alcuno, certo* (able to appear in the position _N in Old Italian) and zero determination, the most frequent indefinite determiners in this period, will be object of this study.

The choice of the three corpus texts has been guided by their relative homogeneity according to text type, i.e. the thematic and formal continuity as testified in the anonymous *Novellino* (written by 1280–1300) and the ever since canonical *Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio (the major part of these novellas is written in the second half of the 14th century) and, finally, the slightly epigonic *Novellino* by Masuccio Salernitano (written from 1450 to 1475/76).

The anonymous *Novellino* is one of the earliest Italo-Romance narrative texts. The late 13th century marks the relatively late beginning (in the context of Romance languages) of the Italo-Romance writing tradition and therefore represents an important turning point in the emancipation of Romance languages from Latin domination. Boccaccio's *Decameron* has served as a model for prose literature for centuries, in particular since Pietro Bembo in his influential *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525) established him, together with Petrarca for poetry, as the summit of artistic linguistic perfection in literature and marks the language variety used by Boccaccio as the obligatory variety to choose for any work of high literature in the Italo-Romance world. Even before this, Masuccio had imitated content and style of Boccaccio, although his southern Italian origins (Salerno) and a certain portion of narrative originality allow to consider his *Novellino* an independent work of Italian narrative.

In view of the fact that the overwhelming part of written texts in the centuries central to this study, i.e. the late 13th, the 14th and the 15th century, is in Latin, a language without obligatory nominal determination, and that Modern Italian like every Modern Romance language has definite and indefinite articles and a great variety of indefinite quantifiers and pronouns (cf. Longobardi 1991; Renzi 1991), the main questions of this discussion will be: What is the textual function of indefinite determiners in these early texts? Where do they appear at the beginning of their 'grammaticalization path' (cf. Hopper & Traugott 1993 und Heine *et al.* 1991) to obligatory articles and other indefinite determiners? What are the relevant semantic properties of nominal indefinite elements that determine their further development into articles and quantifiers? How can modern dynamic model-theoretic semantics like DRT (Kamp & Reyle 1993) or 'File

Change Semantics' (FCS, Heim 1982) and their further developments (see Farkas 2002) deal with these properties and the textual behaviour of indefinites, which leads finally to a close relationship between textual information organization and specificity as an inherent property of some indefinites?

The paper is organized as follows: After presenting some of the most important studies on determiner grammaticalization in Romance and other languages, especially the different 'stages' which are postulated and the related referential and textual categories like 'specificity', 'persistence' and so on, in section 2, I will shortly introduce the concept of 'scopal specificity', central to this study, and the syntactic contexts favouring 'specificity variation' and analysed therefore as '(non-)specificity indicators' in section 3. Section 4 comprises then the empirical results concerning the distribution of four indefinite determiners in the relevant contexts, together with some exemples drawn from the corpus texts, showing a rather clear distribution of the indefinite nouns phrases according to the specificity or non-specificity (and the 'persistence') of the respective discourse referents introduced by the different determiners, which permits to integrate 'specificity' as a lexical feature of indefinite determiners in a certain 'stage' of determiner grammaticalization—also for the precursor of the indefinite article in Old Italian, but also to illustrate the changes inside the paradigm of indefinites towards their functional distribution in Modern Standard Italian.

2   EMERGENCE AND FUNCTION OF NOMINAL DETERMINERS IN ROMANCE LANGUAGES

The beginning of a systematic use of nominal determiners in late Latin texts is analysed in detail in the seminal work by Selig (1992). Latin demonstratives, *ipse* and later almost exclusively *ille*, occur first with non-continuous, i.e. newly introduced or re-introduced, referents of considerable importance (protagonists, important details like objects, times, places): nominal determiners seem to systematically mark foregrounded information, often with postverbal internal arguments, before they spread to continuous referents, changing their textual potential. In this scenario, we can notice a strong correlation between (in-)definiteness and information structure, especially at a textual level, in that nominal determiners first mark foregrounded information and in a second step acquire the textual value of 'given'—v. 'new' information (definite v. indefinite in a textual approach to (in-)definiteness like the

one in Heim 1982, for example)[3]. Selig points out, however, that on the way to systematic grammaticalization of definite determiners as anaphoric devices and—always later and neither functionally nor distributionally symmetrical to them—indefinite determiners as referent-introducing signals, we have to accept a period of systematic marking of each important, individualized referent, i.e. of marking of highly 'persistent' (cf. Givón 1983) elements, which remain a matter of interest ('topical') for a considerable portion of the text. This can be shown for many modern languages possessing definite and indefinite articles, which in the early stages of determiner grammaticalization systematically demonstrate a high preference to mark particularly important elements in texts (see, for example, Blazer 1979 and Selig 1992). Speakers and writers highlight important referents, first by certain indefinite elements, later in the text by definite determiners, searching to lend a certain profile ('foreground v. background of the story') to their texts.

These results correspond exactly to those of Givón (1981) for the beginning of the presumably universal development of the numeral 'one' to an indefinite determiner. In this period, generic reference for example may still remain unmarked, like in the very beginning of Greenberg's (1978) 'Stage II' of article development (cf. Greenberg 1978: 62) and article use, which is spreading then also to generic uses, before it becomes the unmarked case for any nominal ('Stage III'). Greenberg does not mention any intermediate stage where, especially in the domain of indefiniteness, different nominal determiners are semantically and functionally distinguished with respect to certain semantic and/or discourse-pragmatic categories. Also Givón (1981) fails to identify this important period, mentioning only a period of indefinite 'referentiality marking' v. non-marking in 'non-referential' (conflating in this term non-specific, generic and even predicative uses of nominal phrases[4]) cases. Focusing on the different uses of 'one' becoming a nominal determiner, Givón (1981) does not even discuss 'one' becoming slowly one element of a

[3] The same development is described for definite determiners in Germanic languages in Leiss (2000), who uses the term of 'hypodetermining language' for languages with nominal determiners in a foregrounding function, and 'hyperdetermining language' for languages with highly grammaticalized nominal determiners with the textual value of 'given' v. 'new'. Leiss discusses the raise of article systems in connection with the loss of verbal aspect, both indicating 'boundedness' of event types or entities involved in events, a thesis no longer discussed here, given that Romance languages preserve an aspectual differentiation at least in the past (simple past as perfective and 'aorist', imperfect tense as imperfective or iterativ/durativ/habitual).

[4] Cf. Givón (1981: 49f), for the exact spread of 'one' to non-referential, i.e. locally bound objects, generic subjects and then predicate nouns.

whole paradigm of nominal indefiniteness markers, acquiring and/or changing a proper semantic value with respect to the other indefinite determiners.

So what remains at most implicit in most of the studies on determiner development, is the fact that from the period of optional focusing of important referents by determiners to the obligatory marking of each continuous discourse referent (at least in argument position[5]) by the definite and, also, of each new (singular) discourse referent by the indefinite article, there is an intermediate period to be identified, the one under examination here for Old Italian. It will be shown that maybe not the very first Romance texts, but the first highly elaborated texts of (Italo-)Romance literature show a clear lexical diversification, based on the fundamental distinction between specific and non-specific reference, which will get lost on the way of the Romance languages to languages with fully grammaticalized article systems. So, the following steps on the way to grammaticalized article systems are to be postulated: a first stage with already rather systematic, but still optional marking of important referents (mainly postverbally); a second stage where nominal determiners appear also with less important referents and even with generics, but can be differentiated by their 'specificity potential' (see below, section 3); a third stage with nominal determiners being fully grammaticalized and 'reorganized' around the textual dimension of 'given' v. 'new' and losing at the same time the clear lexical differentiation according to the 'specificity' of their discourse referents.

3   SPECIFICITY AND TEXTUAL INFORMATION STRUCTURE

The notion of specificity is fundamental to the following informal speaker-oriented distinction: An indefinite singular noun phrase may be used to denote a particular entity, or to speak of any arbitrary member of the class described by the noun phrase (Lyons 1999: 165). In the DRT-framework, indefinite noun phrases can be seen as introducing variables and a predicate (the noun's denotation), together with certain value-assignment conditions on these variables (cf. Farkas 2002). Farkas (2002) starts from this basic assumption and modifies the 'Novelty-Familiarity-Condition' of DRT or FCS for (in-)definiteness.

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[5] For a typological language classification according to the possibility of admitting bare noun phrases in argument position cf. Chierchia (1998).

Any complex noun phrase ('description') has to meet the 'Descriptive Content Condition'[6], and definite descriptions then do not allow any choice with respect to the value assigned to the variable[7]. Indefinite noun phrases have only to meet the 'Descriptive Content Condition', but are underspecified with respect to determinacy of reference (see Farkas 2002). The concept of *specificity* as an independent referential category of noun phrases[8] can be understood in this context in a first step as covering a bundle of phenomena, i.e. different ways in which the choice of value for the introduced discourse referent is specified/restricted or varying.

Now the most important account of specificity[9] for our study is a dichotomic one and 'concerns the question of whether the interpretation of a variable within a particular expression varies or not as a result of the presence of a variation inducing operator' ('scopal specificity', Farkas 2002: section 3). In the following, *specific* will accordingly be understood as 'non-varying interpretation of the variable', and *non-specific* as 'interpretation depending on a variation inducing operator'. Several trans-sentential anaphora referring back to the same discourse referent can for example indicate that a particular, individualized discourse referent is introduced by the indefinite noun phrase in question. In a textual account of specificity, specifics can be seen as exclusively bound by an existential quantifier with text scope ('existential closure', see Heim 1982: 220ff. and 254) and therefore independent of any other local operator. This makes specificity a central concept of information organization in texts as, roughly speaking, the value-assignment of the introduced variable of specifics does not vary according to operators or other contexts elements coocurring with specifics.

As there are special contexts which provoke a specific and others which provoke a non-specific interpretation of indefinite noun phrases (due to the presence of overt or covert modal operators or quantifiers), Haspelmath (1997) analyses the occurrences of different series of indefinite pronouns in such contexts (for specific interpretation: especially arguments of predicates aspectually marked as perfective;

[6] Cf. Heim (1982). Descriptions with a lexically headed NP are predicative in that they have descriptive content and require the variable introduced by them to satisfy the predicate contributed by the NP.

[7] For further details and the term of 'determined reference' for definites see Farkas (2002), section 2.

[8] A point which is not at interest here, given that I am discussing only indefinite NPs. For further discussion see, for example, von Heusinger (2002).

[9] For a short overview of the main semantic theories of specificity see, von Heusinger (2002: section 5).

for non-specific interpretation: especially 'negative polarity contexts' like questions, the protasis in conditionals, the scope of negation, 'irrealis' contexts like imperatives, futures etc.).[10] The latter contexts can be described semantically as containing different 'variation inducing operators', influencing the interpretation of the variable introduced by the indefinite noun phrase in the scope of the respective operators. The former ones are contexts like main clauses, argument positions of finite verbs, perfective aspect, because the main storyline ('foreground') is normally developed in these syntactic surroundings with discourse referents with non-varying value-assignment to their respective variables; indicators of specificity are continous, trans-sentential anaphora to one and the same discourse referent, especially over a rather long distance.

I assume with Farkas (2002) for the stage of Old Italian I am discussing here that 'the semantic function of morphemes occurring in the Determiner area of argumental DPs is to constrain various aspects of the function that is to give value to the variable contributed by the DP'[11]. Therefore I will analyse in the following the distribution of the four most frequent indefinite determiners in the texts, which will reveal their different contribution to the textual information organization by signalling quite unambiguously specificity or non-specificity. In order to identify indefinites marking specificity, differently determined indefinite NPs in the texts will be analysed according to their appearance in main clauses ('main cl.'), as arguments of finite verbs ('finite'), preferably with perfective aspect ('perf. asp.'); in order to capture the precise form of the already rather generalized marking[12] of 'important referents', the 'cataphoric potential' ('cata.pot.'; a criterion meaning here exclusively the ability to be referred to by anaphoric devices in trans-sentential anaphora) and the 'persistence' (i.e. a

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[10] Note that the described 'scopal specificity' is to be differentiated from 'epistemic specificity', appearing also in transparent contexts and concerning the identifiability of the intended referent by the speaker or the subject of a clause. This 'epistemic specificity' is not at issue in the further discussion. Haspelmath provides linguistic evidence for this distinction by showing that some languages have a different series of indefinite pronouns for specific indefinites denoting referents known and those unknown to the speaker, for example, in Russian, cf. Haspelmath (1997), 45–48.

[11] Farkas (2002, section 3: 15). She shows for Hungarian the finding that the (morphological) variation inside the paradigm of indefinite determiners is related to the possibility of 'dependent interpretations', 'dependent' meaning dependent on a variable-binding operator. This is what I will show for Old Italian.

[12] As, in our texts, indefinite subject-NPs appear preferably preverbally and indefinite object-NPs postverbally, which indicates that word order is no longer available to indicate information structure and is thus replaced in this function by nominal determiners, and as we have a beginning marking of generic NPs by nominal determiners, Old Italian is clearly no longer a 'hypodetermining language' according to Leiss (2000) and no longer in Greenberg's Stage I or in the beginning of the use of nominal determiners in late Latin texts like the one described by Selig (1992).

considerably long-lasting ability of being referred to by anaphoric devices, normally over more than four following sentences—'cent. ref.'), of the discourse referents introduced by the respective indefinite NP will be discussed in sections 4.1 and 4.2 below. In order to identify the 'sensitivity' of the different indefinite determiners for scopal non-specificity, I will furthermore analyse their distribution in the scope of direct negation ('neg.'), in interrogative contexts ('question'), conditionals ('protasis') and in 'irrealis contexts' (see above, 'irr.con') in sections 4.2 and 4.3.

Interestingly enough, Kamp (2001) discusses precisely the problem of choice and variation of different nominal determiners as a discourse-pragmatic problem in his proposal of a 'use-oriented approach to specificity and related notions', when he asks, from the speaker's point of view, 'what indefinite NP to choose' (Kamp 2001: 6.), if the hearer of a discourse element does not have 'a representation in his entity library for the entity [...] which the speaker [...] represents' (Kamp 2001: 4) by a noun phrase. Kamp mentions some contexts (for example trans-sentential anaphora to indefinite antecedents) which incite a non-existential ('specific') interpretation, and asks whether it could be '*part of the semantics* of such discourses that the indefinite gets a non-existential interpretation' (Kamp 2001: 8f.). In this study, I will go a step further in investigating indefinite elements and show that in a precise stage in the development of a language into a language with fully grammaticalized nominal determiners not only context elements, but also the lexical semantics of indefinites itself incites specific or non-specific interpretation.

4   PROPERTIES OF INDEFINITES IN OLD ITALIAN: SPECIFICITY AS A FEATURE OF THE SINGULAR DETERMINERS

To understand the lexical differentiation in Old Italian indefinite determiners, we have to shed a light on Modern Standard Italian, a language with a clearly grammaticalized article system. In Modern Italian, there is a textual opposition of definite (neutrally marked by the definite article *il* and its allomorphs) and indefinite noun phrases, the latter being either marked by the indefinite article derived from the numeral *uno* (cf. Givón 1978 and Renzi 1976) for singular count nouns in argument position, a partitive article (*del*)[13] for singular mass

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[13] Probably inherited of Gallo-Romance languages and appearing relatively late, so that it has not been considered in this study.

nouns in certain syntactic positions, especially in preverbal subject and in object position, and with zero or a plural partitive (*dei*) or *alcuni* ('some') or *certi* ('certain') with plural count nouns. Zero is in these cases always interpreted non-specifically and extremely restricted in preverbal position (for details see Renzi 1991).

I will in the following concentrate on the correspondences or differences between the major indefinite nominal determiners in Old and Modern Standard Italian. I will examine the distribution of *uno* and *alcuno* (in Modern Italian only under scope of negation in the singular meaning 'nobody' or 'none', with specific indefinite interpretation 'some' only in the plural), I will have a look at *certo* ('a certain'), which is an often mentioned indicator of specific interpretation and which occurs (interestingly enough) also alone (without *uno*) as a nominal determiner in Old Italian. Finally I will analyse occurrences of bare noun phrases (determined by 'zero'), since bare noun phrases are usually interpreted as indefinite in the above mentioned semantic theories (DRT, FCS). I have analysed up to 200 occurrences of each of the three indefinite determiners and will discuss only the singular occurrences here, and, additionally, a random selection of 100 occurrences of bare singular noun phrases.

Before I have a closer look at the correlations between distributional properties of *uno*, *alcuno*, *certo* and zero and textual information structure, the etymology of *uno* and *alcuno* has to be summarized. Classical Latin had a rather clear-cut distribution of indefinite nominal markers (cf. Orlandini 1983; Mellet 1994), in that *quidam* (not continued in the Romance languages) was predominantly used with indefinite NPs with specific interpretation, especially in subject position, while *aliquis*, the first part of the morphologically complex *alc-uno*, accompanied non-specifically interpreted indefinite noun phrases, and *uno* was neutral in this regard.

4.1   *Specificity and 'zero'*

Concerning the textual information organization, Old Italian *uno* seems to be especially used for the introduction of specific and important referents.

If we look only at the two last lines of Table 1, more than half of the occurrences of *uno* introduce highly persistent referents, and about a quarter introduce protagonists, important objects, places and so on, whereas the other determiners are relatively rare in these functions. It is to be noted however that also bare noun phrases ('zero') can introduce discourse referents with a certain 'cataphoric potential' (25.33%)—a fact

Table 1 Distribution and 'persistence' of indefinites in 'foregrounded' portions of all texts.

	uno	*%*	*alcuno*	*%*	*certo*	*%*	Zero	*%*
all texts	577		275		24		300	
main cl.	353	61.18%	91	33.09%	12	50.00%	175	58.33%
finite	442	76.60%	159	57.82%	16	66.67%	211	70.33%
perf. asp.	245	42.46%	35	12.73%	10	41.67%	99	33.00%
cata.pot.	**306**	**53.03%**	**30**	**10.91%**	**4**	**16.67%**	**76**	**25.33%**
cent.ref.	**146**	**25.30%**	**3**	**1.09%**	**1**	**4.17%**	**9**	**3.00%**

that is partly explained by their generic value. Unlike locally bound non-specific indefinite bare noun phrases, generic bare noun phrases constitute quite often the topic of a whole paragraph, especially in the *Novellino*, where they form the head of anaphoric chains.

Besides the clearly generic cases, there are many occurrences of bare noun phrases which cannot be grouped without problems under the heading of 'generic', even sometimes not under 'indefinite' in the sense of 'new to the discourse':

(1) *Marato standosi sopra la poppa e **verso il mare** riguardando, di niuna cosa da lor guardandosi, di concordia andarono e, lui prestamente di dietro preso, il gittarono **in mare**; e prima per ispazio di più d' un miglio dilungati furono, che alcuno si fosse pure avveduto Marato esser caduto **in mare**.*
'While Marato was standing at the stern and looking towards the sea, not bothering about them, they all went together towards him and, after quickly having seized him from behind, they threw him into the sea, and they were more than one mile away when somebody realized that Marato had fallen in the sea.'
(Boccaccio, *Decameron*, p. 127)

Mare in the phrase *il gittarono in mare* refers not only to a uniquely identifiable referent in this context, but also to an already mentioned, i.e. textually given discourse referent, which makes it difficult to see the PP *in mare* simply as non-referential, as part of an event-type (*gittare in mare* is furthermore much less lexicalized than *cadere in mare*). Zero in locative PPs is a rather common feature of early stages of article grammaticalization and is still preserved in Modern Standard Italian,

Table 2 Distribution and 'persistence' of indefinites in 'foregrounded' portions of the *Decameron*.

	uno	*%*	*alcuno*	*%*	*certo*	*%*	Zero	*%*
Dec.	187		139		10		100	
main cl.	**96**	**51.34%**	**58**	**41.73%**	**3**	**30.00%**	**58**	**58.00%**
finite	**128**	**68.45%**	**80**	**57.55%**	**4**	**40.00%**	**68**	**68.00%**
perf. asp.	**66**	**35.29%**	**28**	**20.14%**	**3**	**30.00%**	**33**	**33.00%**
cata.pot.	105	56.15%	12	8.63%	3	30.00%	23	23.00%
cent.ref.	62	33.16%	2	1.44%	0	0.00%	1	1.00%

especially with the preposition[14] *in*. Contrary to the normally non-referential or better 'non-actualized' (cf. Coseriu 1955) or generic use of noun phrases in Modern Standard Italian, our texts show a rather systematic differentiation between PPs with important locations for the ongoing story (normally with indefinite or definite determiners) and less important ones (cf. Stark 2001) like in example (1). This is an example of the difficulties in analysing bare noun phrases simply as either non-referential or indefinite (or generic): it is neither the mere concept of 'seahood' nor a new discourse referent in the above passage, but an unimportant one, part of the background information ('setting').

4.2   Certo *v.* alcuno—*From non-specificity to negativity*

Analysing the presumed specificity of *certo* and the probable non-specificity of *alcuno*, given its etymology (see above), we can observe a gradual specialization of these two elements on 'specific' v. 'non-specific contexts' from the 14th century (*Decameron*) to the 15th century (*Novellino* of Masuccio).

In the *Decameron* (Table 2), *uno* and zero appear with more than half of their occurrences in main clauses, as arguments or adjuncts of finite verb phrases and slightly more often in the scope of a perfectively marked verb. *Alcuno* and *certo* (with very few occurrences in all the three texts, so that the statistics have mere indicative value), however, do not differ very much from this behaviour, except perhaps in the interesting detail that *alcuno* cooccurs only in 20.14 % of its singular occurrences with perfective aspect.

While all indefinites analysed still mainly occur with finite verbs, we find a clearer picture in Masuccio (Table 3) when it comes to the

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[14] Cf. Renzi (1991: 412). Renzi classifies these cases under 'non-referential', which becomes problematical in sentences with clear perfective aspect: *Poi andarono in teatro* ('Then they went to the theatre').

Table 3 Distribution and 'persistence' of indefinites in 'foregrounded' portions of Masuccios *Novellino*.

	uno	%	*alcuno*	%	*certo*	%	Zero	%
Mas.	197		128		10		100	
main cl.	**99**	**50.25%**	**29**	**22.66%**	**7**	**70.00%**	**48**	**48.00%**
finite	**135**	**68.53%**	**71**	**55.47%**	**8**	**80.00%**	**63**	**63.00%**
perf. asp.	**63**	**31.98%**	**7**	**5.47%**	**5**	**50.00%**	**27**	**27.00%**
cata.pot.	99	50.25%	16	12.50%	1	10.00%	14	14.00%
cent.ref.	44	22.34%	1	0.78%	1	10.00%	1	1.00%

distribution according to textual fore- or backgrounding. *Uno* and *certo* are now by far the most important referent-introducing devices in main clauses, while only a fifth of *alcuno*'s occurrences (22.66%) is found in these contexts. Together with the finding that perfective aspect in the past marks the main 'story line' in (Romance) narrative texts, *alcuno*'s 5.47% of occurrences with perfectively marked verbs indicate its specialization on background information:

(2) *E quivi collocata la muglie e sua fameglia, avenne che de questa giovane se innamorò* **un gentiluomo** *de la città de assai onorevole fameglia, il cui nome* **per alcuna buona accagione** *de tacere ho diliberato. Costui, amando ferventissimamente, né cognoscendo* **modo alcuno** *per la disposizione del luoco a fornire suo disiderio, né per la solenne guardia del gelosissimo marito avendo ardire de intrare con lei in trame, si pensò voler in ciò interponere l'arte de* **una certa feminella sua domestica***. . . .*
'And after having established there his wife and her family, it happened that a noble young man, whose name I decided not to tell for some good reason, a man from the city and from a very good family fell in love with this young woman. This man, deeply in love, as he did not know, because of the local arrangement, any way to satisfy his desire and as he could not, because of the extreme jealousy of the husband, dare to get in contact with her, thought of using the art of a certain girl, a servant of his. . .'
(Masuccio, *Novellino* 12, *narrazione*, section 1)

Both *uno* and *certo*[15] appear here in the main clause, with finite verbs in perfective aspect, and both introduce important referents (the male protagonist and one of his helpers). *Alcuno* appears first in a subordinate sentence, in the narrator's commentary, but with specific potential—it can easily be assumed that there is one particular reason why the

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[15] Although already in an adjective-like position.

Table 4 Distribution of indefinites in 'non-specific' contexts and with perfectively marked verbs in the *Novellino*.

	uno	*%*	*alcuno*	*%*	*certo*	*%*	Zero	*%*
Nov.	193		8		4		100	
neg.	**1**	**0.52%**	**0**	**0.00%**	**0**	**0.00%**	**0**	**0.00%**
question	1	0.52%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	2	2.00%
protasis	4	2.07%	2	25.00%	1	0.00%	3	3.00%
irr. con.	11	5.70%	2	25.00%	1	25.00%	6	6.00%
perf.	**116**	**60.10%**	**0**	**0.00%**	**2**	**50.00%**	**40**	**40.00%**

narrator does not want to mention the name of the male protagonist. Using *alcuno* in this context may signal that the reader should not hope to ever identify this reason and that there will not be anything else told about it in the ongoing text. The second, postponed *alcuno* is clearly negative, appearing in the scope of sentential negation in a subordinate and non-finite verb phrase.

If we have now a closer look at the 'non-specific contexts' (see above), we can observe a continuous loss of the initial non-specific interpretations of *alcuno* and its drift towards negative contexts—modern *alcuno* in the singular almost exclusively occurs in the scope of sentential negation.

Considering only two criteria, cooccurrence with sentential negation on the one hand and perfective aspect on the other, we can see an important development from the almost archaic anonymous *Novellino* in the late 13th century (Table 4) with generally very little lexical variation in the field of nominal indefiniteness and a systematic marking of highly important and specific referents by *uno* in the foreground of the single novellas, regardless of negation:

(3) *Nelle parti di Grecia ebbe **un signore** che portava corona di re et avea grande reame et avea nome Filippo; e per **alcuno misfatto** tenea **un savio greco** in pregione, il quale era di tanta sapienzia, ch'ê lo intelletto suo passava oltra le stelle.*
'In Greece, there was a noble man who wore the king's crown and had a vast kingdom and had the name Filippo; and for some crime, he kept a wise Greek man in prison, whose wisdom was so great that his intellect overpassed the stars.'

(*Novellino* 2, section 1)

The socially most important protagonist and his opponent, the Greek, are both introduced with *uno*, while *alcuno* introduces a secondary detail (it is not important for the ongoing story to know

Table 5 Distribution of indefinites in 'non-specific' contexts and with perfectively marked verbs in the *Decameron*.

	uno	%	*alcuno*	%	*certo*	%	Zero	%
Dec.	187		139		10		100	
neg.	**4**	**2.14%**	**34**	**24.46%**	**0**	**0.00%**	**17**	**17.00%**
question	2	1.07%	10	7.19%	0	0.00%	2	2.00%
protasis	3	1.60%	5	3.60%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
irr. con.	21	11.23%	28	20.14%	0	0.00%	12	12.00%
perf.	**66**	**35.29%**	**27**	**19.42%**	**3**	**30.00%**	**33**	**33.00%**

Table 6 Distribution of indefinites in 'non-specific' contexts and with perfectively marked verbs in Masuccios *Novellino*.

	uno	%	*alcuno*	%	*certo*	%	Zero	%
Mas.	197		128		10		100	
neg.	**4**	**2.03%**	**46**	**35.94%**	**0**	**0.00%**	**4**	**4.00%**
question	0	0.00%	5	3.91%	0	0.00%	2	2.00%
protasis	1	0.51%	8	6.25%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
irr. con.	31	15.74%	25	19.53%	1	10.00%	11	11.00%
perf.	**63**	**31.98%**	**7**	**5.47%**	**5**	**50.00%**	**27**	**27.00%**

why the Greek was in prison), still being in the foregrounded part of the text (main clause, no negation, conditional etc.).

Boccaccio's *Decameron* (Table 5) shows one of the most varied paradigms of indefinite determiners (and pronouns) in the corpus. It demonstrates the obvious 'specificity opposition' of *uno* v. *alcuno*, the former appearing rarely in negative or negative polarity contexts (and occurring with important referents, as demonstrated above), the latter still appearing in foregrounded portions of the text (with perfective aspect), but occurring already more often particularly in negative contexts. The latest text, Masuccios *Novellino* (Table 6), shows a strengthening of this development towards Modern Standard Italian, with more than a third of the *alcuno*-occurrences in negative contexts (see above, example (2)).

4.3   *Lexical differentiation*

A synopsis of all the three texts shows that *uno* and *certo* are definitely the Old Italian determiners in the textual foreground (compare also the findings for textual persistency of discourse referents introduced by *uno* and *certo* in Table 1), *uno* having almost lost the etymological potential of being neutral with respect to specificity oppositions.

For an impressive example of the almost complementary distribution

Table 7 Distribution of indefinites in 'non-specific' contexts and with perfectively marked verbs in all texts.

	uno	%	alcuno	%	certo	%	Zero	%
all texts	577		275		24		300	
negation	9	1.56%	80	29.09%	0	0.00%	21	7,00%
question	3	0.52%	15	5.45%	0	0.00%	6	2,00%
protasis	8	1.39%	15	5.45%	1	4.17%	3	1.00%
irr. con.	63	10.92%	55	20.00%	2	8.33%	29	9.67%
perf.	**245**	**42.46%**	**34**	**12.36%**	**10**	**41.67%**	**100**	**33.33%**
gen.							49	16.33%

of *uno* and *alcuno* with respect to 'specificity' contexts, see the following example:

(4) *I due fratelli, come che molta speranza non prendessono di questo, nondimeno se n' andarono a una religione di frati e domandarono **alcuno** santo e savio uomo che udisse la confessione d' un lombardo che in casa loro era infermo; e fu lor dato **un** frate antico di santa e di buona vita e gran maestro in Iscrittura e molto venerabile uomo, nel quale tutti i cittadini grandissima e speziale divozione aveano, e lui menarono.*
'The two brothers, although they did not have much hope from this, went to a monastery and asked for a holy and wise man who could hear the confession of a Lombardian who was in their house, sick, and they were given an old monk of holy and good life and a great master of the Holy Bible and a very venerable man, who was devotionally honoured by all the citizens, and they took him with them.'

(Boccaccio, *Decameron*, p. 30)

The internal argument of the intensional verb *domandare* ('to ask for') without existential presupposition is introduced by *alcuno*, indicating clearly the non-specific status of this discourse referent. Only when the semantics of the main predicate (*fu lor dato*—'they were given') implies the existence of its internal argument (still postverbal in the example and with very similar lexical material) and when the noun phrase in question introduces an important referent (in this case one of the protagonists), the 'real' and permanent referent-introduction is done by non-bound *uno*. This and other examples provide further evidence for the variable-analysis of indefinite *uno*, bound by (existential) operators in the non-specific case (here inside the VP, cf. among others Carlson 1977; Heim 1982; van Geenhoven 1998) and free or with non-varying interpretation of the variable in question in the specific case.

I want to point out nevertheless that in Old Italian texts there is very little ambiguity as to the opposition between specific or non-specific interpretation of indefinite noun phrases—Old Italian writers knew 'what indefinite to choose' (see the quotation from Kamp 2001, above) and marked the 'specificity—non-specificity-opposition' with rather non-ambigous indefinite determiners.

5 CONCLUSION

A close examination of the textual distribution of the four main Old Italian indefinite determiners *uno*, *alcuno*, *certo* and zero in singular noun phrases in three collections of novellas with respect to 'specific' v. 'non-specific' contexts and sentential and textual information organization, revealed a rather clearcut lexical differentiation in Old Italian. *Uno* and *certo* occur preferably with important referents, while *alcuno* is non-specific and only slowly acquiring its modern negative value. The function of zero resists any simple classification as 'indefinite', i.e. discourse-referent-introducing, being much more common also in the singular than in Modern Italian and having several values (generic, non-referential, non-specific etc.).

Finally, Latin *unus*, being first a numeral without sensitivity as to the 'specificity—non-specificity-opposition' (cf. Selig 1992: 112), becomes a semantically specialized determiner in Old Italian. Here, the whole paradigm of the main indefinite determiners allows to treat specificity or non-specificity as a lexical feature of functional elements. From there on, however, we assist a gradual spread of *uno* also to non-specific contexts from the 14th century to contemporary Standard Italian (cf. Tables 4 to 6; simultanously, *alcuno* is restricted to negative contexts, zero to non-referential ones, and *certo* loses its status as a determiner), where the two possible interpretations of *uno* in ambigous, particularly in opaque contexts, can be indeed discussed as a matter of syntax or even pragmatics.

Acknowledgements

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