Francoprovençal (B): Galloromance varieties without mass vs. plural distinction?

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The aim of our talk is the presentation and discussion of a system which does not seem to mark systematically the distinction between indefinite mass singular nouns and plural count nouns. The language in question is Francoprovençal (FrPr), a highly endangered and never standardized and highly varying oral Gallo-Romance language, of which different varieties are spoken in the south-west of Switzerland (mainly canton of Valais), in north-western Italy (mainly Aosta Valley) and in the part of France bordering on Switzerland (mainly Savoy). More precisely, we will concentrate here on what has been called "Francoprovençal B" (Kristol 2014, 2016), varieties spoken in eastern Valais (Switzerland), Savoie (French) and Aosta Valley (Italy), without gender-marking on the plural definite article, almost no inflectional number marking on nouns and an invariable indefinite determiner DE appearing obligatorily in front of mass singulars and plural count nouns in the absence of other nominal determiners or quantifiers. While the two former properties are also found in French, this language has, in contrast to "Francoprovençal B", a grammaticalized fully-fledged so-called 'partitive article', an indefinite determiner allowing to differentiate between singular and plural (1) (and between masculine and feminine in the singular) plus an uninflected DE in contexts of negation, without presupposition of existence (2):

(1)   Mes grands-parents ne mangeaient pas que **de la tarte** / **des tartes.**
        my   grandparents   not eat.IPFV.3PL not only PA   cake   PA cake
        'My grandparents didn't only eat cake / cakes.'

(2)   Mes grands-parents ne mangeaient pas **de tarte(s).**
        my   grandpartens   not eat.IPFV.3PL not DE cake(s)
        'My grandparents didn't eat cake(s).'

(3)   nu mˈɛtɛ̃   **də bˈɑrɔ̃**   pɔr aˈi   **də brˈɑːʒə**
        we put.PRS.1PL DE fir.cone(s) for have.INF DE ember(s)
        'We put fir cone(s) in order to have ember(s).'

This is surprising considering that almost all varieties of "Francoprovençal B", just like modern standard French (except for spelling, with an almost always silent graphic <–s> on nouns), have only very few residues of number marking on the noun (except Evolène, a village with some sigmatic plural being realized on subgroups of masculine nouns, and except the feminine *-a-e-* declension class, with vocalic number marking like Italian, see below). Recall that all Romance languages are considered to be DP-languages (following Chierchia 1998a) with number marking and no classifiers. Against this view, Herslund 1998 and Stark (2008a, b) have claimed that French has a kind of classifier system (and no number marking) in the indefinite singular, systematically opposing e.g. *un*[M.SG] *vin* ('one glass or sort of wine', count) and *du vin* ('wine as a substance, mass: [dyvɛ̃]), as well as *du vin* ('wine as a substance', mass: [dyvɛ̃]) and *des vins* ('wines', several sorts or glasses of wine, count plural: [devɛ̃]). Nominal morphology being highly defective in French, overt gender and number (important agreement features also in Gallo-Romance) marking thus takes place in the left-peripheral functional domain of the DP,

via determiners, definite and indefinite ones, with bare nouns being systemically excluded in argument position.

Exploiting questionnaire data from 20 Francoprovençal communalities (18 in Valais and 2 in the Aosta Valley) collected between 1994 and 2001 and documented in the audiovisual database ALAVAL (http://alaval.unine.ch/), we find the following picture, quite different from French, for "Francoprovençal B":

In 496 valid translations of input sentences which contained a French partitive article (277 feminine, 219 masculine), only 149 noun phrases are marked for number, i.e. only 30%, all the others being ambiguous between a mass singular and plural count reading (see example (3)). It is notable that most noun phrases overtly marked for number are feminine (132, against only 17 masculine nominals), and that the morphosyntactic type of marking varies heavily and relies even sometimes on maybe borrowed partitive articles with overtly expressed gender- and number features:

(4)   e mˈinze   **de ʒ ʊːʃ**
        he eat.PRS.3SG DE z egg(s)
        'He eats eggs.'

In contrast to all other Romance and most Indoeuropean languages (except some varieties of Occitan, cf. Stark 2016 for a preliminary overview), the "Francoprovençal B" system seems to systematically oppose semantic 'non-singular' (following e.g. Chierchia's 1998a, b proposal for the common semantics of mass nominals and plurals, assuming also the Link (1983) lattice-theoretical approach) to semantic singular, i.e. atomic, non-overlapping reference (signaled by the indefinite article and 'counting quantifiers' such as equivalents of engl. SEVERAL, cf. Borer 2005), instead of marking morphological number and the mass-count-distinction in a systematic way. If this interpretation of our data is correct, indefinite *de*-nominals in "Francoprovençal B" are in a way syntactically defective and should have only a limited distribution, a prediction that is partially borne out (cf. Ihsane 2018, who shows their impossibility to appear in preverbal subject position). "Francoprovençal B" would be, in this perspective, a typological outlier in the concert of Romance languages and also a challenge to attempts to model plural marking or indefinite determiners including partitive articles as (in)directly encoding the count-mass distinction.

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