The Syntax of Nominals

9.1 The Expression of Indefiniteness

The cardinal numeral 'one' (*xa*) is often used as an indefinite article that is a grammatical signal of the indefinite status of the nominal, i.e. when the speaker assumes that the hearer is not able to identify the referent of the nominal. The particle *xa* is not used with all nominals that have indefinite status on the pragmatic level. Certain general tendencies can be discerned in its usage, though there are no categorical rules. The English indefinite article has a far wider distribution among nouns with indefinite status and it is often appropriate to use the indefinite article in an English translation where no *xa* particle appears in the dialect.

The particle *xa* may also be combined with the word *dana*, a Kurdish word literally meaning 'grain', to express indefiniteness, e.g. *xá-dana màlca*ˈ 'a king' (A 3:1), *xa-dana ⁺ɟilasta* 'a cherry'.

The distribution of the indefinite marker *xa* in comparison with zero marking will first be examined and subsequently the motivation for the use of the marker *xa-dana* rather than *xa* will be considered.

In general, the marker *xa* tends to occur with an indefinite countable nominal with a referent that is individuated and salient in some way, whereas it tends to be omitted when these features are absent.

A major factor that determines the individuation or salience of an indefinite nominal is whether the speaker is using it to refer to a specific referent in the class of items denoted by the word or whether it is being used in a less specific sense to refer to any item in the class. Indefinite nominals with specific referents generally have *xa* whereas those with non-specific referents frequently lack the particle. Referentially specific usages of indefinite nominals occur more frequently, as one would expect, in narratives than in expositional discourse concerning general customs.

In narrative contexts the specific referents of such indefinite nominals introduced by *xa* often play an important role in the subsequent context, which is reflected by the fact that they are referred to in subsequent clauses. This, therefore, is a factor that further enhances the salience of the referent. Examples:

(1) ʾə́tva lə̀tvaˈ xá yàla ʾə́tvaˈ ⁺mə́sta ⁺ʾal-rə́šu ⁺rába lə̀tva.ˈ ci-⁺ḳarívalə cačalùnaˈ ⁺rába-zə naxùpəvaˈ ⁺rába-zə ⁺zadùyəva.ˈ hə́č mən-béta léva ⁺pláṭa ⁺ʾal-

vàddar.| 'Once up on a time, there was a lad who did not have much hair on his head. They used to call him baldy. He was very shy and very timid. He never used to go outside of the house.' (A 37:1)

An indefinite nominal referring to a period that functions as an adverbial is typically combined with the particle *xa* when the reference is to one specific time. This is often found at the beginning of a narrative section, where the adverbial sets the temporal frame of what follows, e.g.

(2)   *xà-yuma*| +*ḳrílə* +*rába mən-dánnə náš̌ə lìpə.*| 'One day he summoned many learned men.' (A 3:3)

(3)   *xà-yuma*| *màlca márəl* +*ḳa-*+*ʾAxìḳar*| 'One day the king says to Axiqar …' (A 3:14)

(4)   *xá-yuma bábu yə́mmu … bəxzáyəna bruné ɟarvùsələ.*| 'One day, his father and mother notice that their son is growing up.' (A 37:2)

The particle is also found with spatial adverbials which typically set the spatial frame for the following section of text, e.g.

(5)   *xa-dúcta* +*rába šaršùyələ.*| *mı́yyət* +*àyna*| *bəxzáyələ xá* +*àyna.*| *ʾìta| bəštá-yələ xáč̌č̌a mən-de-*+*àyna.*| *də́pnət de-*+*áyna bədmàxəl*| *sáb* +*rába šuršìy-yəva*| +*bəṭlàyəl.*| 'At a certain place he becomes very tired. He sees a spring water, a spring. So he drinks a little from that spring. He falls asleep at the side of that spring, because he was very tired, and he sleeps.' (A 37:6)

When the generic word *məndi* 'thing' has a specific referent and is combined with *xa*, its contents are generally explicated in the following context, e.g.

(6)   +*ʾo-ḳaṭùla*| … *mə̀rrə*| *málca ṭ-ávət basìma,*| +*báyyən xà-məndi tanə́nnux.*| *mára mù=ilə?*| *tàni!*| 'The executioner … said "King, be well, I want to tell you something". He says "What is it? Speak!"' (A 3:47)

The durability of the referent of a noun with *xa* in the following context may be of a lesser extent than in the examples cited above, but nevertheless there is generally has some kind of relevance to what follows. In (7), for example, the relevance of the 'hole' extends to the content of the following subordinate clause but not beyond this.