1 Introduction

The expression of indefiniteness presents a wide degree of variation across languages. In addition to indefinite quantifiers such as *alcuni* ‘some’ or pseudo-partitive constructions such as *un po’ di* ‘a bit of’, Italo-Romance varieties present at least five types of indefinite determiners that can combine with mass or plural nouns. Interestingly, more than one of these determiners may be available in one and the same variety, producing a certain degree of optionality and / or a fine-grained distinction in the semantics of indefiniteness.

In this paper, we concentrate on the most wide-spread forms of indefinite determiners, claiming that they are variants of one and the same syntactic structure. Assuming with Abney (1987) that the highest portion of the nominal structure (DP) includes two positions, a specifier (SpecDP) and a head (D), we take the indefinite operator, which provides the indefinite semantics, to occur in SpecDP, while the head D is specified for the gender and number features of the nominal projection. Both positions may be overt or covert. The indefinite operator can be realized by the uninflected form *di*, while the head D can be realized by the same form as the definite article. The option of filling either position with an overt or covert element gives rise to four different forms: the zero determiner, indefinite bare *di*, the so-called “partitive determiner” *di*+article, or the use of the definite article as indefinite determiner.

We first show that in Italian, optionality is in some cases apparent, giving rise to subtle semantic differences. In particular, we show that in Italian, overt
di+art with singular mass nouns is restricted to narrow scope interpretation, unlike di+art with plural count nouns, which may have wide or narrow scope interpretation. We then focus on the lesser studied central Italian dialect of Ancona, which provides further evidence for the different scope properties of indefinite mass vs. plural count nouns.

The rest of the paper is devoted to a preliminary review of the cross-linguistic data reported by three AIS maps, namely 1037 “if there was water”, 1343 “to go to the cellar to take wine”, and 637 “to go and look for violets”. Although AIS was mainly collected to report lexical choices, the three maps set two mass nouns “water” and “wine” and one count plural nouns “violets” in postverbal position in non-veridical contexts, which facilitate (despite not univocally forcing) indefinite non-specific narrow scope. This will allow us to have a general picture of the realization of the core notion of indefiniteness in Italo-Romance varieties at the beginning of the past century. The results of this preliminary study will make us raise questions on variation and optionality to be answered by future empirical work.

2 Six Types of Indefinite Determiners in Italo-Romance

In many languages, the morphosyntactic ways to express indefiniteness sort singular count nouns apart from singular mass and plural count nouns. In this section, we provide an overview of the many indefinite determiners found in Italian and Italo-Romance dialects, starting with indefinite singular individuals and proceeding with the multifaceted ways to express indefinite mass and indefinite pluralities.

2.1 Indefinite Singular un(o) / una

Italian and its dialects have an indefinite determiner un(o)/una which occurs with singular count nouns as in (1a) (cf. AIS: 533 “a tree”; 181 “a handsome man”) and never appears with mass nouns (1b):

(1) a. Ho raccolto una violetta.  
   [I] have picked a violet

---

1 We have consulted the AIS maps with NavigAIS, Tisato (2009).

2 The paper will not discuss indefinites in preverbal subject position because this position triggers different scope properties of nominal expressions and interacts in a complex way with the form of the determiner.