



Indefinite definites in Italian

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Abstract

This paper examines indefinite interpretations associated with morphologically definite articles in Italian, such as *Ha comprato {i tulipani / l'olio}* ('She bought (the) tulips / (the) oil'), which allow both a default definite reading and an indefinite interpretation. The paper addresses two main research questions: (i) what grammatical conditions allow indefinite definites in Italian?, and (ii) why do only Italo-Romance varieties, and not other Romance languages, allow the presence of indefinite definites (in addition to bare nouns, the so called "partitive article" and even a bare *di*)? The primary contribution of the paper is to show that the indefinite reading of definite internal arguments in Italian cannot be derived from a weak definite approach, from kind denotation, or from an operation of *derived kind predication*. Instead, we argue that internal definite (plural and mass) arguments can be interpreted as conveying an indefinite reading, as long as the event in which they participate denotes incremental homogeneity (Landman and Rothstein 2010, 2012a, 2012b). This hypothesis is supported by the productivity of indefinite definites in habitual (and iterative) contexts, which are incrementally homogeneous by definition; and their compatibility with *per* 'for' (and *ogni* 'every' N) temporal modifiers. Concerning the cross-linguistic and cross-dialectal puzzle, the paper highlights that the use of indefinite definites for the expression of weak indefiniteness reveals the bidirectional influence between dialectal substrata and the national language, giving prominence to the role of competing grammars in speakers of informal Italian.

Keywords (in)definiteness · Indefinite definites · Incremental homogeneity · Italian · Italian dialects · Romance languages

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1 Introduction

The expression of indefiniteness in Italian (and its dialectal varieties) has been claimed to be difficult to classify in a typological fashion, especially from a pan-Romance perspective (see especially Stark 2007, 2008, and Pinzin and Poletto (2022), who dubbed these complications as an “indefinite maze”). Singular indefinites show a homogeneous distribution in Romance, because these languages generally display a singular indefinite determiner, stemming from the Latin numeral *unus*. However, the expression of indefiniteness (understood as lack of semantic uniqueness / maximality, and lack of pragmatic familiarity),¹ when applied to plural count nouns and mass nouns, may show several forms within Romance: a bare nominal (BN, as in Catalan and Spanish; Suñer 1982; Laca 1999; Leonetti 1999; Brucart 2002; Longobardi 1994, 2001, 2005), *di*+ART (as in French *des / du / de la*; Dobrovie-Sorin and Laca 1996, 2003, 2008, 2012), and what is unique in Italian: the use of a definite article with an indefinite reading (as observed by Rohlf's 1968: 119 in relation to mass nouns, resumed by Renzi 1997: 163, 2001; and studied in depth by Zamparelli 2002 and Cardinaletti and Giusti 2018, 2020, Giusti 2021 also with respect to plural count nouns).² Consider the data in (2) and (3). Notice that we indicate the ambiguity of the article by using a *def/indef* subindex.

- (1) Ha comprato *un tulipano*.
AUX buy.PART a tulip
'She bought a tulip.'
- (2) a. Ha comprato *tulipani*.
AUX buy.PART tulips
'She bought tulips.'

¹ According to the uniqueness requirement (Frege 1892; Russel 1905; Strawson 1950) a definite expression is felicitous only if there is one and only one entity in the context that satisfies its descriptive content. A definite plural or a definite mass description designates the sum or totality of all entities to which the predicate applies (Sharvy 1980). By contrast, the familiarity condition (Christophersen 1939; Kamp 1981; Heim 1982) states that a definite is felicitous only if the existence of its referent is presumably known by the hearer.

² Notice that indefinite definites (IDs), as originally labeled by Zamparelli (2002), are only available with plural count and mass nouns. As observed by Cardinaletti and Giusti (2018), a syntactically and semantically singular count noun forces the default definite interpretation of the definite determiner, as attested in (i), which can only describe the situation in which the speaker picked the uniquely identifiable violet in the context of utterance. In other words, (i) doesn't allow the reading according to which the speaker picked just a (non-specific) violet.

- (i) Ho raccolto *la_{def/#indef} violetta*.
have picked the violet
'I've picked the violet.'
- (Cardinaletti and Giusti 2018: 138, e.g. (4a))

This paper is not concerned with indefinite readings associated with morphologically singular nouns, which allow for number-neutral interpretations, as attested in (ii).

- (ii) L'hotel ha *la piscina*. Una in terrazzo e una in giardino.
the.hotel has the pool one in terrace and one in garden
'The hotel has (a) pool(s). One on the terrace and one on the patio.'

- b. Ha comprato *dei tulipani*.
AUX buy.PART di+ART tulips
'She bought tulips.'
- c. Ha comprato *i_{def/indef} tulipani*.
AUX buy.PART the tulips
'She bought the tulips. / She bought tulips.'
- (3) a. Ha comprato *olio*.
AUX buy.PART oil
'She bought oil.'
- b. Ha comprato *dell' olio*.
AUX buy.PART di+ART oil
'She bought oil.'
- c. Ha comprato *l'_{def/indef} olio*.
AUX buy.PART the oil
'She bought the oil. / She bought oil.'

These examples show that Italian, on a par with Catalan and Spanish, allows the occurrence of BNs in internal argument position (Chierchia 1998a, b; Renzi 2001), (2a) and (3a). However, Italian also behaves partly like French, thus allowing so-called "partitive articles" (Chierchia 1998a, b; Zamparelli 2008; Cardinaletti and Giusti 2016), (2b) and (3b). Since the partitive determiner has lost its etymological partitive reading (Carlier and Lamiroy 2014; Cardinaletti and Giusti 2016), we will use the more descriptive term *di+ART* to refer to these Italian constructions.³

The main goal of the present paper is to provide a formal account of the indefinite reading of the Italian definite article in (2c) and (3c). This idiosyncratic use of the definite article in informal Italian (and Italo-Romance varieties) was observed in depth in a series of works by Cardinaletti and Giusti (2018, 2020), and Giusti (2021), who point out that in (4) *le violette* 'the violets' is ambiguous between its default definite (maximal and familiar) interpretation and a non-conventional indefinite reading, which neither entails totality nor a presupposition of existence. In this second interpretation *le violette* entails the existential reading of a non-maximal set of violets.

³The (apparently) optional alternance between *di+ART* and BNs is attested in the following example:

- (i) Ho visto (degli) studenti.
have seen di+ART students
'I've seen (some) students.'

However, it should be remarked that some differences exist between the two constructions. We take *di+ART*, but not BNs, to specialize for expressing specificity (precisely due to the coexistence with the BN competing form), even though a non-specific interpretation is not *a priori* excluded. Hence, only *di+ART* can have wide scope readings in the presence of logical operators. Although not developed in this paper, we consider (following Morosi and Espinal 2023) specificity to be the result of the application of a semantic choice function, which takes a non-empty set as its input (i.e., the denotation of the noun introduced by the determiner) and gives back specific members of this set as its output (Winter 1997; Reinhart 1997, among others). More specifically, we identify specificity with von Heusinger's (2011, 2019) notion of "referential anchoring," where a specific reading arises from the anchoring of a referent to another element salient in discourse (e.g., the speaker, the subject, quantified expressions, etc.). By contrast, the competing form—i.e., BNs—expresses weak indefiniteness, exactly like the indefinite reading of the definite article in (2c) and (3c).

- (4) Ho raccolto *le*_{def/indef} *violette*.

have picked the violets

'I've picked the violets. / I've picked violets.'

[Cardinaletti and Giusti 2018, (4b)]

In view of (2c), (3c), and (4) in this article, we address the following two questions:

- Q1. What are the grammatical conditions that license an indefinite reading for the definite article in Italian?
- Q2. Why is Italian special among Romance languages for allowing this construction, and for having three forms dedicated to the expression of indefiniteness?

To address the first question, we consider different aspectual classes of verbs, perfective/imperfective distinctions, and temporal modifiers. We hypothesize that the indefinite reading of a definite DP emerges when the event denoted by the VP is the part that denotes incremental homogeneity (i.e., incremental preservation of cross-temporal identity of an event, and of its event type; see Landman 2008; Landman and Rothstein 2010, 2012a, 2012b), which is at the basis of the preference for habitual VPs and *per* 'for' modifiers.

In order to address the second question, we consider two northern Italo-Romance dialects and the coexistence of competing patterns in bi(dia)lectal contexts. We postulate that only informal Italian (but not other Romance languages) displays competing alternatives for the expression of weak indefiniteness (namely, BNs and IDs) due to language / dialect substrata.

This paper is structured as follows: Sect. 2 provides an overview of the relevant data. Section 3 is devoted to the revision of the three major trends of analysis of Italian IDs, which contend that these uses should be analyzed (i) as (short) weak definites (Sect. 3.1), (ii) as directly kind-denoting definites (Sect. 3.2), or (iii) as existentials derived from kind denotation (Sect. 3.3). In Sect. 4, we flesh out our grammatical analysis, which consists in (i) assuming a common indefinite determiner structure for BNs, IDs, and *di*+ART (Cardinaletti and Giusti 2015, 2016, 2018, 2020; Giusti 2021; Espinal and Cyrino 2022a, 2022b), also in (ii) associating the possibility of an indefinite reading with the incremental homogeneity (Landman 2008; Landman and Rothstein 2010, 2012a, 2012b) of the event denoted by the VP, of which the ID is the internal argument. In Sect. 5, we address the different rate of occurrences of IDs in two northern Italian dialects, and we take the role of dialectal substrata as the main determining factor in the emergence of IDs in informal Italian. Finally, Sect. 6 concludes the paper.

2 The data

A fundamental argument to show that the definite descriptions under investigation do not correspond to their canonical unique / maximal interpretation is based on scope: IDs take narrow scope with respect to negation and quantificational expressions (as

described by Cardinaletti and Giusti 2018; Zamparelli 2002). This is illustrated in (5) and (6).⁴

- (5) I vegetariani *non* mangiano *la*_{#def/indef} *carne*.
 the vegetarians not eat the meat
 ‘Vegetarians don’t eat meat.’
- (6) Mangia {*il*_{#def/indef} *gelato* / *le*_{#def/indef} *verdure*} *tutti i giorni*.
 eat the ice cream the vegetables all the days
 ‘She eats {ice cream / vegetables} every day.’

The sentence in (5) is a generalization that describes a habitual situation, namely the fact that generally vegetarians don’t eat meat. To get this reading, the direct object needs to scope under the negative marker. A wide scope reading would trigger an infelicitous interpretation, according to which vegetarians don’t eat the (same) referentially unique (amount or type) of meat salient in the context of utterance. Nevertheless, a definite article with an indefinite, narrow scope interpretation is allowed in Italian in this precise environment. This scope behavior, which in fact corresponds to the only possible interpretation for this construction (Cardinaletti and Giusti 2018), shows that Italian IDs behave differently from standard definites (see Carlson’s 1977 “scopelessness”).⁵

⁴Example (5) is partly inspired by the following example in Cardinaletti and Giusti’s (2020: 689) questionnaire, in which speakers were asked acceptability judgments.

- (i) Nella tua varietà di italiano parlato, un vegetariano direbbe:
 [In your variety of spoken Italian, a vegetarian would say]:
- Non mangio carne.
not I.eat meat
 - Non mangio la carne.
not I.eat the meat
 - Non mangio di carne.
not I.eat of meat
 - Non mangio della carne.
not I.eat of.the meat
 - Non mangio certa carne.
not I.eat certa meat
‘I don’t eat meat.’

⁵One may suggest that the presence of *i vegetariani* in subject position conceptually activates the referent of *la carne* (Arnold 2010; Myers et al. 2000; Brocher et al. 2016; Brocher and von Heusinger 2018; among others), potentially triggering an existence presupposition. However, consider the following example:

- (i) Maria non ha mangiato *la*_{indef} *carne* per tutta settimana, perchè {non ce *n’era* /
 Maria not AUX eat.PTCP the meat for all week because not CL CL-be.IPFV.3SG
 perchè non *ne* aveva a casa}.
 because not CL AUX.IPFV.3SG at home
 ‘Maria didn’t eat meat all week because {there wasn’t any / she didn’t have any at home}.’

These examples further show that IDs are consistently interpreted under the scope of negation independently of the kind of subject. Moreover, these nominal expressions are not associated with any existence presupposition, as they are resumed by the property-type anaphora *ne* (Espinal 2010; Espinal and Giusti 2024), and are compatible with continuations that explicitly negate the existence of meat in the context.

A similar scope pattern can be observed in combination with quantifiers. Sentence (6) is also interpreted as denoting a habitual situation, in which the subject eats ice cream (or vegetables) every day. The direct object *il gelato / le verdure* needs to scope under the universally quantified expression *tutti i giorni*. A default definite would be expected to display a scopeless behavior in the same scenario, which is however not an adequate interpretation for the habitual sentence in (6). Such infelicitous reading would correspond to a situation in which the subject eats the same amount of ice cream (or the same set of vegetables) every day, which is at odds with our world knowledge. By contrast, IDs show a narrow scope reading that correlates with their indefinite interpretation.

As for other contexts that disallow the presence of IDs, it should be observed that in the literature it has been claimed that these constructions are severely degraded in perfective environments. This claim is apparently supported by contrasts like the following:

- (7) a. Maria mangiava *le*_{def/indef} *angurie*.
 Maria eat.3SG.IMP the watermelons
 'Maria used to eat watermelons.' [Donazzan and Gritti 2013: 184, (12)]
- b. Maria ha mangiato *le*_{def/#indef} *angurie*.
 Maria AUX eat.PERF the watermelons
 'Maria ate #(the) watermelons.'

Though *le angurie* can be associated with an indefinite interpretation in an imperfective environment (7a), perfective aspect appears to force a definite reading (7b). For now, we note that this restriction is not systematic, as evidenced by the examples in (8), where both the plural noun *le angurie* and the mass noun *l'anguria* can receive an indefinite interpretation, irrespective of their occurrence in a perfective context.

- (8) a. Sin da bambina, Maria ha (sempre) mangiato *le*_{def/indef}
 since of kid Maria AUX always eat.PERF the
angurie.
 watermelons
 'Since she was a child, Maria has (always) eaten watermelons.'
- b. Maria ha mangiato *l'*_{def/indef} *anguria*.
 Maria AUX eat.PERF the.watermelon
 'Maria ate watermelon.'

Notably, (8a) shows that habitual readings are available, even with perfective verbs, an issue we will revisit in Sect. 3.2 and Sect. 4.2. In Sect. 4.2, we will further explore the perfective/imperfective distinction and show that IDs can also occur in perfective environments, provided the events they participate in allow for an incrementally homogeneous interpretation.

Concerning the distribution of IDs, there does not appear to be a consensus in the literature. According to Zamparelli (2002:4), the distribution of IDs is quite diverse: objects, postverbal subjects, subjects of passives, and preverbal subjects. On the other hand, Cardinaletti and Giusti (2018) provide only examples with IDs in object position. On closer scrutiny, we argue that IDs can only occur as objects of transitive verbs and prepositions, and as internal subjects of unaccusative constructions (un-

accusative verbs and passive constructions), but never as subjects of transitive verbs. The unavailability of IDs in the latter syntactic position is not universally agreed upon (*cf.* Zamparelli 2002). In Sect. 3.3, we will provide arguments in favor of our claim. The example in (9) exemplifies the occurrence of IDs both in complement position of a V and a P, which parallels the well-known distribution of Romance BNs under the interpretation that Gianni just ate (some) rice with (some) mushrooms.

- (9) Gianni ha mangiato *il*_{def/indef} *risotto* con *i*_{def/indef} *funghi*.
 Gianni AUX eat.PART the rice with the mushrooms
 ‘Gianni ate risotto with mushrooms.’

Example (10) illustrates the possibility that the internal definite subject of an existential construction be interpreted as indefinite.

- (10) La casa è sporchissima. In cantina ci sono *i*_{def/indef} *topi* ...
 the house is dirty.SUPERLATIVE in basement there are the mice
 ‘The house is extremely dirty. In the basement there are mice’
 (Zamparelli 2002: 8, (28))

Similarly, the examples in (11) illustrate an ID in internal subject position of an unaccusative verb or in a topicalized position.

- (11) a. Arrivavano *i*_{def/indef} *treni* ogni 5’ per tutto il giorno.
 arrive.3PL.IMP the trains every 5 for all the day
 b. *I*_{def/indef} *treni* arrivavano ogni 5’ per tutto il giorno.
 the trains arrive.3PL.IMP every 5 for all the day
 ‘(The) trains were arriving every 5 minutes all day long.’

In order to deepen our knowledge of the conditions that favor IDs in Italian, we have considered four different grammatical factors: (i) verb classes (activities, accomplishments, achievements, and states), (ii) aspectual (perfective, imperfective) distinctions, (iii) habitual and iterative constraints, and (iv) temporal (*per* ‘for’, *in* ‘in’) modifiers. As a general outcome, Table 1 in the Appendix provides novel data showing the following: (i) the four classes of verbs may combine with ID plural count nouns and ID mass nouns in internal argument position;⁶ (ii) the possibility of an indefinite reading for the definite article is independent from the aspectual (perfective / imperfective) distinction; (iii) in habitual (and iterative) contexts, an indefinite reading is preferred over the definite one; and (iv) an indefinite reading is more salient with *per* ‘for’ temporal modifiers, whereas a definite reading is preferred in association with *in* ‘in’ temporal modifiers.

Summarizing the present section, we have shown that definite plurals and definite mass nouns can be productively associated with an indefinite reading in informal Italian. This non-canonical interpretation of definite articles parallels the indefinite interpretation of bare plurals and bare mass nouns, as attested by the fact that they can all be interpreted under the scope of negation and other quantifiers. We have shown

⁶In accordance with the intuitions of six native speakers (*Age* = 36.5 years; first Italian dialect: Lombard (4 speakers, *Age* = 37.25 years), and Venetan (2 speakers, *Age* = 35 years)), we have observed a general preference scale: activities > accomplishments > achievements > states.

that IDs are commonly associated with internal argument positions of transitive verbs (activities, accomplishments, *avere*) and prepositions (e.g., *con*), and internal subjects of intransitive verbs (achievements, *esserci*).

In the section that follows, we review the main linguistic approaches that can be found in the literature on IDs in Italian, and argue that none of these analyses can account adequately for the data described.

3 Previous approaches

On the one hand, it has been contended that Italian IDs should be assimilated to short weak definites in the sense of Carlson and Sussman (2005) and Carlson et al. (2006). This is the proposal by Leonetti (2019), also suggested in recent work by Pinzin and Poletto (2021, 2022).⁷ Other authors, such as Donazzan and Gritti (2013), have claimed (following previous work by Pires de Oliveira and Rothstein 2011, 2013 on Brazilian Portuguese) that definite DPs are to be analyzed as generic expressions. More specifically, definite DPs are claimed to refer to kinds. This possibility has also been assumed by Pinzin and Poletto (2021, 2022). Finally, Zamparelli (2002) argues that the non-definite existential readings of Italian definite articles are derived from the (alleged) primary kind of reading these nominal expressions, by means of Chierchia's (1998b) semantic operation of *derived kind predication*.

In what follows, a detailed review of these approaches is pursued. We argue, however, that none of these analyses can provide an account of the verbal contexts that display indefinite readings for the definite article in internal argument positions in Italian.

3.1 Weak definites

A short weak definite (WD) is a definite DP, which occurs in the object position of a transitive verb (or a V + P structure), and that together with this V (or V + P) forms a complex predicate, which encodes some stereotypical information, usually associated with a typical or characteristic activity with respect to some accessible background knowledge (e.g., *take the train*, *do the dishes*, *go to the doctor*; *guardarsi allo specchio*).⁸

Leonetti (2019) suggests a broader view of WDs, which includes VPs, such as those in (2c) and (3c): *mangiare {il pesce / i cioccolatini}* 'to eat {fish / chocolates}',

⁷Other scholars, such as Gerards and Stark (2022), associate IDs in Italian, along with analogous constructions in Old Spanish and Francoprovençal, with other weakly referential definites. Specifically, they argue that such constructions convey *representative object interpretations* (as in *In Alaska we filmed the grizzly*; Krifka et al. 1995: 78, (124f)) available in what is called a *kind-oriented mode of talk* (Krifka et al. 1995). Typically, however, this type of representative object interpretation is associated with morphologically singular definite DPs with a presuppositional reading (e.g., *the grizzly*). In contrast, IDs are associated with plural or mass nominal expressions, which show a non-specific, non-maximal, and non-presuppositional interpretation.

⁸Previous references include Carlson and Sussman (2005), Carlson et al. (2006), Aguilar-Guevara and Zwarts (2011, 2013), Aguilar-Guevara (2014), Schwarz (2014), Krifka and Modarresi (2016), Espinal and Cyrino (2017), among many others.

bere / prendere {il caffè / la birra / il vino} ‘to drink {coffee / beer / wine}’, *mettere lo zucchero nel sugo* ‘to put sugar in the sauce’, *il gatto con gli stivali* ‘the cat with boots’. This suggestion is based on the observation that WDs, as originally conceived in the literature, and IDs appear to share some properties: narrow scope, non-unique reference, sloppy identity in elliptical contexts, restrictions on modification, non-familiar reference, occurrence in object position, and resemblance with generic definites. Let us just illustrate this similarity by considering a couple of properties not mentioned in the preceding text.

In (12a) the ID *le verdure* allows a disjoint interpretation in the two VPs, exactly like the WD *the hospital* in (12b).

(12) *Sloppy identity*

- a. Gianni ha cucinato *le_{def/indef} verdure* e anche Paolo lo ha fatto.
Gianni AUX cook.PART the vegetables and also Paolo CL AUX do.PART
‘Gianni cooked vegetables and Paolo did too.’
(Gianni and Paolo cooked different vegetables)
- b. *Lola went to the hospital* and Alice did too.
(Aguilar-Guevara 2014: 16, (15a))
(Lola and Alice could have gone to different hospitals)

In (13a), moreover, the ID *i pomodori* allows an indefinite reading when restricted by the subkind modifier *San Marzano*, but not when modified by a restrictive relative clause. Notice that this is what happens with the WD *the hospital*, which only allows modification by classificatory adjectives, such as *psychiatric* in (13b).

(13) *Restrictions on modification*

- a. Gianni ha raccolto *i_{def/indef} pomodori* {San Marzano / che Gianni AUX pick.PART the tomatoes San Marzano that erano sull’ albero} e anche Paolo lo ha fatto.
are.3PL.IMP. on.the tree and also Paolo CL AUX do.part
‘Gianni picked up {San Marzano tomatoes / #(the) tomatoes that were on the tree} and Paolo did too.’
- b. *Lola went to the {psychiatric / #old} hospital* and Alice did too.
(Aguilar-Guevara 2014: 19, (38) and (36))

Despite these similarities, several differences set WDs apart from IDs. WDs show additional properties: lexical restrictions (both on the verb and the complement noun), number restrictions (involving mostly singular count nouns), conventionality, meaning enrichment, discourse referential restrictions, the head of the object is usually a count noun, and the object resembles bare singulars (*play the piano / play piano*) (See Aguilar-Guevara 2014 for a detailed list of the properties characterizing WDs). Crucially, none of these seven properties are shared by IDs. As presented in Sect. 2 (and further detailed in Appendix A), (i) IDs can occur with all types of verbs and nouns; (ii) IDs are only allowed with plural count nouns and mass nouns; (iii) IDs do not convey conventionality or meaning enrichment; (iv) they

do not show discourse referential restrictions (i.e., though WDs prefer pronominalization by pro-VPs, such as *to do so*, Italian IDs commonly allow resumption by third person pronouns); (v) the nominal head of an ID can be either a plural count or a mass noun; and (vi) IDs discard singular number, because a singular definite DP would have as its extension an individual atomic entity (see footnote 2).

Due to these differences, we conclude that WDs and Italian IDs constitute different interpretative possibilities for definite expressions.⁹

3.2 Kinds

Under a second approach, IDs are assimilated to intensional arguments, such as kind-denoting expressions, and are ultimately claimed to refer to intensional kinds. This is the view pursued by Donazzan and Gritti (2013), who build on Landman and Rothstein's (2010, 2012a, 2012b) work on English bare plurals (as well as on Pires de Oliveira and Rothstein's (2011, 2013) study on bare nominals in Brazilian Portuguese).¹⁰

The intensional interpretation of “weak” nominal expressions and their association with kind interpretations has its origin in Carlson's (1977) semantic analysis of bare arguments of kind-level (k-level) predicates in English. Landman and Rothstein (2010, 2012a, 2012b) extend this assumption to all bare plurals in argument position, in such a way that in *eat mangos*, the stage-level (s-level) predicate *eat* is claimed to be systematically ambiguous between an episodic interpretation in which EAT has an individual theme (i.e., a mango or a plurality of mangos), and a generic / gnomic interpretation, in which EAT involves the k_{MANGO} .¹¹ Furthermore, Landman and Rothstein claim that the intensional nature of the thematic argument of the verb makes the VP to be interpreted as atelic; in other words, these authors argue that the referential properties of the internal argument have an impact on the aspectual interpretation of the VP. Following this line of reasoning, Donazzan and Gritti (2013:183) note also that “it is the aspectual class of the verbal predicate and the aspectual modification of the sentence that play a major role for licensing the weak interpretation of the nominal expression.” However, as Table 1 in Appendix A shows, both claims appear to be false: ID readings can be obtained in the internal argument position of predicates, which do not trigger a generic interpretation of the object (i.e., with the four classical aspectual classes of verbs). Moreover, an indefinite reading for definite internal arguments is possible irrespective of the aspectual modification of the VP, whether conveying perfectivity or imperfectivity.

Donazzan and Gritti (2013:207) also claim that the acceptability of IDs in imperfectives improves when the DP is modified by an adjective or a PP, which gives a subkind reading. Consider the minimal pair in (14).

⁹See Giusti (2022) for a similar conclusion reached independently.

¹⁰See, in contrast, Cyrino and Espinal's (2015) DP/NP analysis of bare nominals in Brazilian Portuguese.

¹¹See also Chierchia (2023).

- (14) a. #Gianni scriveva *le lettere*.
 Gianni write.3SG.IMP the letters
 ‘Gianni {was writing / used to write} #(the) letters.’
 (Donazzan and Gritti 2013: 207, (67a))
- b. Quand’era impiegato in comune, Gianni scriveva *le lettere commerciali*.
 when be.3SG.IMP employed in town-hall Gianni write.3SG.IMP the letters business
 ‘When he was employed at the town hall, Gianni used to write business letters.’
 (Donazzan and Gritti 2013: 208, (68a))

Against this argument, we point out not only that the ID reading is available both in perfective and imperfective contexts, even when the noun is unmodified (as most examples in Appendix A illustrate), but also when the allowed modifiers do not necessarily introduce sub-kind readings, as illustrated in (15).

- (15) Quando abitavamo in Canada Gianni scriveva *le lettere alla mia famiglia*.
 when live.3SG.IMP in Canada Gianni write.3SG.IMP the letters to.the my family
 ‘When we were living in Canada, Gianni used to write letters to my family.’
 (Donazzan and Gritti 2013:208, (68b))

Moreover, the unmodified internal object of (14’) can in fact be associated with an ID reading in an appropriate context, as shown below.

- (14’) [At the front, and in order to help other soldiers,]
 a. Gianni scriveva *le_{def/indef} lettere*.
 Gianni write.3SG.IMP the letters
 ‘Gianni {was writing / used to write} (the) letters.’

Furthermore, the ID interpretation remains available also with expressive modifiers, as shown in (16).

- (16) Gianni ha cucinato ancora *le cazzo di patate*.
 Gianni AUX cook.PART still the dick of potatoes
 ‘Gianni cooked fucking potatoes again.’

The expressive term *cazzo*, which is not a (sub-)kind modifier, appears to be a fully grammaticalized element along the lines of Cavirani-Pots (2020), as attested by the lack of gender and number agreement with the plural feminine noun *patate*. As such, this item can be analyzed as a purely functional element located in a functional-like projection responsible for expressivity in the nominal domain (Gutzmann 2019). Alternatively, it could also be located within the DP domain.¹² Importantly, both syntactic positions would block the availability of any kind-denotation for the definite object, thus precluding a generic-like analysis, such as the one proposed by Donazzan and Gritti (2013).

¹²See Cavirani et al. (2024) for a proposal on these lines.

One last comment in relation to the postulated association between indefiniteness and genericity. If IDs were supposed to convey weak readings because they refer to intensional kinds, we would not be able to account for the contrast in (17) and (18).

- (17) I francesi hanno inventato *le_{gen} patate fritte*.
 the French AUX invent.PART the potatoes fried
 ‘The French invented fried potatoes.’
 ≠ I francesi hanno inventato *le_{gen} patate*.
 the French AUX invent.PART the potatoes
 ‘The French invented potatoes.’
- (18) Simone ha mangiato *le_{indef} patate fritte*.
 Simone has eaten the potatoes fried
 ‘Simone ate fried potatoes.’
 ⊨ Simone ha mangiato *le_{indef} patate*.
 Simone has eaten the potatoes.
 ‘Simone ate potatoes.’

In (17), the main verb *inventare* is a k-level predicate and the definite object is interpreted as denoting the (sub)kind *le patate fritte*. Interestingly, this type of k-level predicates do not allow upward entailments (Laca 1990; Krifka et al. 1995). By contrast, in (18) the main verb *mangiare* is a s-level predicate with a definite DP object, which is modified by a PP, which refers to a subkind of potatoes. In this case the upward entailment is possible, showing that the association of a definite internal argument with an indefinite (non-maximal, non-presuppositional, upward entailing) interpretation is orthogonal from its modification with a subkind modifier. Moreover, this association cannot be inferred from a theory that treats s-level predicates on a par with k-level ones.¹³

Due to these contrasts, we conclude that IDs must be distinguished from intensional kind-denoting expressions, and that the emergence of indefinite readings for definite internal arguments should be dissociated from the aspectual interpretation of the VP. Specifically, we have argued that obtaining the indefinite reading of a definite internal argument is not contingent on the perfective/imperfective aspectual distinction or the availability of taxonomic modification. In the next section, we consider a closely related proposal, which posits the existential reading of ID to be inferred by a semantic operation independently required in the theory of grammar.

3.3 Existentials obtained by derived kind predication (DKP)

Inspired by a neo-Carlsonian view (Chierchia 1998b), Zamparelli (2002) argues that the indefinite existential reading associated with definite nominal expressions

¹³ A reviewer notes that this entailment pattern follows from any theory that treats the object of (18) as an existential nominal expression at any level of representation. However, Donazzan and Gritti’s (2013) proposal holds that *le patate* in (18) is a kind-denoting definite throughout the whole derivation, and that the eventual existential interpretation is a pragmatic inference resulting from an episodic, non-gnomic interpretation of the predicate. To our understanding, such an analysis would not predict the entailing contrast between (17) and (18), because both instances of *le patate fritte* would be assigned a kind denotation.

in Italian is derived by the DKP operation from generic definite descriptions denoting kinds. In other words, the author assumes that such existential reading is derived in a manner similar to how the existential meaning of bare nouns in English is derived from their kind denotation through DKP (as in Chierchia 1998b).

Chierchia (1998b: 364) derives the existential interpretation of bare plurals in English by means of the DKP rule, which is defined as follows:

- (19) *Derived kind predication*
 If P applies to objects and k denotes a kind, then
 $P(k) = \exists x[\cup k(x) \wedge P(x)]$

DKP is a type shifting rule, which turns a kind denoting argument into an existentially bound indefinite. This operation, formalized in (19), accounts for the existential reading of the bare plural subject *lions* in (20), as the bare plural denoting a kind occurs in the argument slot of a predicate, which does not select for kinds (Chierchia 1998b: 364, (31c) and (32)).¹⁴

- (20) a. Lions are ruining my garden.
 b. Ruining my garden (\cap lions) $\Leftrightarrow \exists x[\cup \cap$ lions(x) \wedge ruining my garden (x)]

Since definite plurals in Italian are assumed by Zamparelli (2002) to be the systematic counterpart of bare plurals in English, as both share the same kind denotation, one would expect these nominal phrases to behave uniformly in all cases. However, this does not appear to be the case. Consider (21).

- (21) a. *Rabbits* are in the cage.
 b. *I conigli* sono nella gabbia.
 the rabbits are in.the cage
 ‘The rabbits are in the cage.’

The English locative sentence in (21a) allows an existential meaning for the BN *rabbits*, which is assumed to be derived through the DKP operation. However, in Italian, the subject *i conigli* in (21b) can only refer to the maximal sum of individuals in the discourse domain, which have the property of being rabbits, an interpretation that is fully consistent with the semantics of the definite article as a maximizing operator (Sharvy 1980). Crucially, the preverbal subject in (21b) does not allow for an indefinite existential reading derived by DKP, which in Italian would typically be expressed using *di*+ART (see (2b) and (3b)): *Dei conigli sono nella gabbia*.

If definite plurals in Italian were to denote kinds, akin to bare plurals in English, one would expect DKP to apply preverbally in Italian as it does in English. Zamparelli (2002) indeed claims that there are contexts where preverbal definite plurals in Italian are interpreted existentially. Consider (22).

¹⁴Contra Chierchia (1998b), Zamparelli (2002) adopts the view that bare nouns in Romance never denote kinds, and therefore that the existential reading, which bare plurals and bare mass nouns have in this family of languages, is not obtained by DKP.

- (22) Nel 1986 *i ladri* hanno svuotato il mio appartamento.
 in.the 1986 the thieves have emptied the my apartment
 ‘In 1986, {the / some} thieves have emptied my apartment.’
 [adapted from Zamparelli 2002:8, (32)]

According to this author, beyond referring to a specific group of thieves, *i ladri* can also refer to “some random, ill-defined or unidentifiable” thieves (Zamparelli 2002:8). The question arises whether this apparent existential flavor corresponds to a genuine existential reading. There are reasons to believe that the definite external argument in (22) does not simply convey an existential interpretation. The expression *i ladri* appears to carry a presupposition of existence of thieves, rather than asserting their existence. This implies that the interpretation associated with the definite plural subject is distinct from the one inferred by the existential operator introduced by the DKP rule, which can only take scope below other logical operators (Chierchia 1998b; Dayal 2004, 2013). In addition, the sentence in (22) is probably not the most natural way to express the fact that some thieves emptied my apartment in Italian. Instead, a speaker of Italian would probably use *di* + ART.

Now, if the interpretation we get with the definite plurals in (22) is not the one that would be expressed by the \exists operator introduced by DKP, what is it? We here suggest two alternatives: (i) *i ladri* constitutes a case of a representative (von Koss Torkildsen 2002; Morosi 2023; cf. Krifka et al.’s 1995 representative object interpretation) or non-maximal (Brisson 1998; Lasersohn 1999; Križ 2016, a.o.) interpretation of the definite DP, or (ii) it introduces an instance of the so-called functional or quasi-universal reading (Condoravdi 1992, 1994; Dobrovie-Sorin and Laca 1996). According to (i), *i ladri* would have a representative interpretation, whereby the definite subject would refer to a representative group of thieves, such as *the Romans* in (23a). Alternatively, *i ladri* can also be claimed to introduce a non-maximal reading, exactly like *the townspeople* in (23b).

- (23) a. *The Romans* built this bridge. (von Koss Torkildsen 2002: 2, (1.1))
 b. *The townspeople* are asleep. (Brisson 1998: 34, (15))

Even in English, in the absence of any antecedent and bridging context, the plural definite subjects in (23) are not associated with any maximality requirement. Rather, they denote a representative or a non-maximal group of individuals: for these sentences to be true, it is not necessary that literally *all* the Romans built this bridge nor that *all* the townspeople are asleep. Some diagnostics can distinguish the non-maximal/representative from the ID reading. A first difference relates to the cross-linguistic availability of representative interpretations, which are found in all languages that display definite determiners. As a result, representative readings—unlike indefinite ones—are expected to be translatable into other languages. This prediction is confirmed not only by (23), but also by (24), which shows that the same reading is available also in Spanish. Crucially, this is not the case for the rest of examples containing an ID, which are remarkably not translatable to other languages with articles (see also Giusti 2021 on this point).

- (24) En 1986 *los ladrones* vaciaron mi apartamento. [Spanish]
 in.the 1986 the thieves emptied my apartment
 ‘In 1986, the thieves emptied my apartment.’

A more reliable test for distinguishing the two uses of definite determiners lies in their interaction with negation. Non-maximal and representative definites refer to non-maximal groups of individuals, but presuppose the existence of their referent. Consequently, unlike IDs, they can only be interpreted outside the scope of negation. This is precisely what happens when negation is inserted in a sentence like (25).

- (25) Nel 1986 *i ladri non* hanno svuotato il mio appartamento.
 in.the 1986 the thieves not have emptied the my apartment
 ‘In 1986, the thieves did not empty my apartment’

The definite description in (25) carries an existence presupposition, which projects and survives negation. As a result, the subject *i ladri* does not take a proper narrow scope reading with respect to the negative operator. This behavior contrasts sharply with that of IDs (as discussed in relation to example (5) and in footnote 5), and that of existentials derived *via* DKP (Chierchia 1998b; Dayal 2004, 2013), which assert existence, but never presuppose it. Given these differences, we conclude that preverbal subjects of transitive verbs are not instances of IDs, a finding that challenges the predictions of Zamparelli’s (2002) approach.

One might also propose that (22) involves a reading in which *i ladri* gets a universal or quasi-universal interpretation (Condoravdi 1992, 1994; Dobrovie-Sorin and Laca 1996). Under this view, however, the existence of thieves would also be presupposed, rather than asserted. Moreover, even if we associate *i ladri* with all (relevant) thieves (and not just arbitrary thieves), who acted at a specific time and place, we would still need to explain the source of the universal reading in the absence of quantified contexts and contextually restricted adverbials. Finally, we would also need to account for the alleged existential reading of the definite subject, which is independent from the universal interpretation.

A final objection arises from expressive modification. As noted in the previous section, expressive modifiers do not preclude the availability of ID readings. Crucially, this would be unexpected under Zamparelli’s (2002) account, which posits that DKP should exclusively apply to kind-denoting nominal expressions.

All in all, we conclude that the postulated logical equivalence between Italian definite plural DPs and English bare plurals should be reconsidered, as the predictions made by the classical analysis of bare plurals cannot be extended straightforwardly to definite plurals. We also conclude that the DKP rule is not universally required, since an existential interpretation cannot be derived from definite plurals in languages that have lexically specified indefinite DPs and indefinite bare plurals to assert an existential meaning.¹⁵

¹⁵See also Borik and Espinal (2015) for additional argumentation in support of the hypothesis that English bare plurals and Spanish definite plurals are semantically distinct, and for the claim that the DKP rule, at least as originally conceived in Chierchia (1998b), does not apply to Romance languages such as Spanish (and Italian).

In sum, this section has reviewed the three major trends of analysis postulated for IDs in Italian. As discussed, each proposal faces several theoretical and/or empirical challenges. Next section characterizes in more detail Italian IDs and fleshes out a new theoretical proposal, which addresses two main grammatical questions: (i) what are the syntactic structures of IDs and of VPs that allow their internal definite arguments to be interpreted as indefinites, and (ii) which are the semantic requirements that VPs must meet to license an indefinite reading for an internal argument.

4 The proposal

4.1 Structure of IDs and habitual VPs

In this section, we present the syntactic assumptions for IDs and habitual VPs.

Following Espinal and Cyrino (2022a, 2022b) and Cyrino and Espinal (2020), we assume a common derivation for bare plurals, bare mass and *de*-phrases (either *di*+ART nominals or the bare *di* nominal expressions in certain dialectal varieties discussed by Cardinaletti and Giusti 2018 and Pinzin and Poletto 2021). According to this proposal, the indefinite interpretation associated with nominal expressions in Romance is syntactically derived by merging an abstract operator DE to a definite D. This abstract operator DE, as shown in (26), is adjoined to a definite determiner.¹⁶

- (26) a. $[_D \text{ DE } [_D \text{ [iPLURALIZER:PL] } [_D \text{ D } [_n \text{ n }]]]]$
 b. $[_D \text{ DE } [_D \text{ D } [_n \text{ n }]]]]$

Sentences with indefinite plural count nouns are assumed to have the structure in (26a), whereas those with mass nouns would have the structure in (26b). Both structures allow a common derivation for BNs, IDs, and *de*-phrases. The structure in (26a) also assumes (in line with Bouchard 2002; Dobrovie-Sorin 2012) that, within the nominal domain, the PLURALIZER in Romance is a feature syntactically adjoined to

¹⁶See Zamparelli (1995) and Ihsane (2008) for antecedents of the hypothesis that several layers should be postulated within the DP. Unlike these approaches, where definiteness is built on top of indefiniteness, (26) accounts for the last resort strategy of IDs pointed out by Zamparelli (2002: 21), in that the indefinite meaning of the definite article is derived on top of a definite D by an additional D projection whose head is an abstract operator DE responsible for weak indefiniteness.

Cardinaletti and Giusti (2015, 2016, 2018, 2020), and Giusti (2021), building on previous work by Giusti (2002, 2015), also propose a unified structure for all Italian and Italo-Romance indefinite forms, as represented in (i).

(i) $[_{DP} 0_{def/indef} / de_{indef} [_D 0/i/l/lolla/i/glille \text{ [NP]}]]]$

However, some crucial differences between this proposal and Espinal and Cyrino's (2022a, b) account should be mentioned. First, according to (i), definite and indefinite DPs correspond to the same syntactic structure, whereas Espinal and Cyrino (2022a, b) argue that indefinite DPs are built on top of definite ones. Second, under the structure in (i), definiteness must be due to a covert definite operator, since the morphologically definite article is claimed to merely encode number, gender, and case features, but to be semantically inert; in contrast, in Espinal and Cyrino the definite article is translated into a *iota* operator and DE is assumed to shift entities into property-type expressions. Finally, the postulated (c)overt (in)definite operator sits in SpecDP in the structure in (i), whereas DE is adjoined to a definite D in Espinal and Cyrino's (2022a, b) system.

D (alternatively, a categorized *d* root); that is, in unmarked cases the PLURALIZER is a modifying feature on D, and instantiations of plural marking within the nominal domain should be conceived of as the output of morphophonological concord, a post-syntactic operation. At *spell-out*, both the operator DE and D allow several morphophonological instantiations, either with an overt or covert exponent.

Concerning the meaning of the structures in (26), DE shifts entities into property-type expressions.¹⁷ This is the meaning that has extensively been assigned to bare plurals in the literature on Romance (Dobrovie-Sorin and Laca 1996, 2003; Laca 1999; McNally 2004; Dobrovie-Sorin et al. 2006; among others). We claim that not only bare plurals (and bare mass nouns) denote properties, but all the other outputs of the structures in (26), namely IDs and *de*-phrases. This move opens the question of how the property (type $\langle e, t \rangle$) denoted by a DP in object position can compositionally combine with a transitive predicate, which prototypically combines via functional application with a nominal of type *e*.¹⁸ We assume that in the nuclear scope an existential quantifier introduces a variable, over which the property denoted by the output of (26) may predicate, thus accounting for the obligatory narrow scope of these nominal expressions. This is represented in (27).

$$(27) \quad \lambda P_{\langle e, t \rangle} \lambda x \exists y [V(x, y) \wedge P(y)]$$

[adapted from Van Geenhoven 1998: 132, (1)]

Crucial to this analysis is the semantic assumption that it is not the indefinite itself that introduces a variable, but the existential quantifier of a *VP existential closure operation* (cf. Heim 1982; Diesing 1992).¹⁹

Beyond the structure attributed to IDs and Romance indefinites in general, we make a second assumption concerning the structure of habitual VPs. Following Boneh and Doron (2013), we take Hab to be a modal modifier adjoined to VP and selected by Asp, as represented in (28).

$$(28) \quad [TP [T] [AspP [\{Perf / Imperf\}] [VP [Hab] [VP]]]]$$

¹⁷A reviewer notes that this proposal seems fundamentally identical to Chierchia's (1998a) approach to *di*+ART nominals, as both posit that the definite article lexicalizes the *iota* function at some stage in the derivation. In Chierchia's (1998a) compositional account, however, the definite article remains fully semantically active, carrying therefore a presupposition of existence. This assumption, however, has been counter-argued on empirical grounds (see especially Storto 2003). The assumptions made in the present paper also differ from Zamparelli's (2008) analysis of *di*+ART, which assumes that the definite article contributes kind-denotation at some point of the derivation.

¹⁸We do not commit to saying that most transitive verbs in Romance are lexically ambiguous (or show "floating" types; McNally 2004) between a variant that allows semantic incorporation of a property (since following this view predicates would be of type $\langle \langle e, t \rangle \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$) and a variant that selects two entities (type $\langle e, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$). McNally (2004: 130) suggests that bare plurals (and IDs in our study) "resemble incorporated nominals (Masullo 1992; Van Geenhoven 1995) without requiring that they be incorporated in any interesting syntactic or morphological sense." By contrast, McNally and Van Geenhoven (1997) defend that all weak nominals are interpreted via semantic incorporation. We leave this issue for the future since it is not our main concern at this point.

¹⁹By contrast, only when we have *text-level existential closure* (Heim 1982:92) and an existential quantifier is adjoined to a text level projection, the existential force is claimed to arise from the indefinite itself. We hypothesize that this text-level existential closure operation is what guarantees that *di*+ART indefinites, in contrast to BNs and IDs, may have a specific reading and a wide scope interpretation in combination with other operators and quantifiers.

In this structure, Hab can be the input of both perfective and imperfective aspect, and is conceived of as being distinct from the head of AspP. Crucially, this relative hierarchical order between Asp and Hab accounts for the fact that both perfective and imperfective meanings can combine with IDs in habitual contexts, as already observed in example (8a).

In the next section, we focus on the semantic requirements that VPs must meet to license an indefinite reading for their definite internal arguments. We hypothesize that the crucial licensing factor is the notion of *incremental homogeneity* at the VP level. This incremental homogeneity can combine with the operator Hab, as habitual statements are inherently incrementally homogeneous by definition.

4.2 Incremental homogeneity at VP level

Cardinaletti and Giusti's (2020) identified in a questionnaire on informal Italian that IDs were especially productive in generic and habitual environments. Similarly, Pinzin and Poletto (2021) relate intuitively the indefinite reading of definite DPs in Italian with contexts of "habitual long-term activities," although this term is not formally defined in any of these studies.²⁰ As observed, Donazzan and Gritti (2013) relate intensional arguments to the atelicity of the VP and the homogeneity of the eventuality structure. Following Landman and Rothstein (2010, 2012a, 2012b), they assume a direct link between the aspectual interpretation of a VP and the referential properties of the internal argument, arguing that the intentional nature of the thematic argument of a s-level predicates, such as *eat*—which for Landman and Rothstein has a kind reference—is what leads to the VP being interpreted as atelic (see Sect. 3.2).

We here follow Carlson's (1977) original idea and assume that k-reference cannot happen with s-level predicates, such as *eat* (*contra* Landman and Rothstein 2010; Donazzan and Gritti 2013; Chierchia 2023). Thus, we assume that the object of *eat* refers either to an object entity of type *e* (when the head of D is a definite article), or to a property of type $\langle e, t \rangle$ (when DE is adjoined to D). Under the assumption that an abstract operator DE is adjoined to definite determiners and shifts entities into property-type expressions (Espinal and Cyrino 2022a, 2022b), the property denoted by BNs / IDs / *di*+ART predicates over the variable introduced by the abstract existential closure operator, which applies to the nuclear scope (see (27)).

With this in mind, and in order to address our research question regarding the semantic requirements that VPs must meet to trigger an indefinite reading for a definite internal argument, we hypothesize that IDs are the output of incremental homogeneity at the VP level (Landman and Rothstein 2010). This hypothesis stems from the observation that (i) IDs can occur in both perfective and imperfective contexts; (ii) they are especially productive in long-term or habitual sentences (Cardinaletti and Giusti 2018; Pinzin and Poletto 2021); and (iii) they prefer atelic over telic modifiers.

²⁰See Gerards and Stark (2022), which hint at the fact that a habitual reading of the predicate strongly favors the use of similar constructions in Old Spanish and Francoprovençal. See also footnote 7.

This hypothesis is grounded on several ingredients, listed below.

1. Eventualities are either states or events.
2. Eventualities have running times $\tau(e)$, defined as the time interval at which an event e goes on.
3. All habitual readings are incrementally homogeneous eventualities.
4. Incremental homogeneity (Landman 2008) is incremental preservation of cross-temporal identity of an event and of its event type, between the running time of the onset of that event (i.e., $\tau(O(e,V))$) and the running time of that event itself (i.e., $\tau(e)$).
5. The notion at the basis of habituality is event iteration (Boneh and Doron 2013), by which at least two events must be considered.

According to this theory, *incrementality* is a purely temporal notion, whereby j incrementally extends i if i is an initial subinterval of j : $i \subseteq_{\text{in}} j$. Second, the notion of incrementality relies on *cross-temporal identity*, conceived as an equivalence relation between events: e_1 is cross-temporally identical to e_2 (i.e., $e_1 \sim e_2$) iff e_1 and e_2 count as one and the same event (i.e., if they count as one event). Third, the notion of *event onset* refers to the smallest eventuality of type V such that $O(e,V)$ is cross-temporal identical to e and $\tau(O(e,V)) \subseteq_{\text{in}} e$.

With these notions in place, let us now consider the definition of incremental homogeneity in (29):

(29) Definition of *incremental homogeneity*

Let α be a VP with event type α and a verbal event type V ,

let $e \in V$ and $e \in \alpha$,

e is *incrementally homogeneous* wrt α and V iff

for every interval i : if $\tau(O(e,V)) \subseteq_{\text{in}} i \subseteq_{\text{in}} \tau(e)$

then there is an eventuality e' of event type α such that:

$e' \sim e$ and $\tau(e') = i$,

and, furthermore, $\text{ITER}(\alpha) = *e''(e'' \subset e)$

[adapted from Landman and Rothstein 2010:237 and Boneh and Doron 2013:181]

The first restriction of this formula imposes that habituality requires some initiating event or onset of e : the onset of e , relative to V , $O(e,V)$ is the smallest eventuality of type V such as that $O(e,V)$ is cross-temporal identical (\sim) to e , and the running time of this onset ($\tau(O(e,v))$) is a subinterval of e , which starts at the same time as e . Thus, the onset is the first stage where the incremental sequence of events cross-temporally identical to e reaches a stage big enough to count as the same event type, because an eventuality e' is cross-temporally identical to e ($e' \sim e$) iff e' and e count as “one and the same event,” and the running time of eventuality e' is identified with an initial subinterval of e . The last part of the formula introduces an operation of event iteration, which is interpreted as a plurality of events (Link 1983) such that $\text{ITER}(\alpha)$ is incrementally homogeneous for any event e'' included in e .²¹

²¹We follow Boneh and Doron (2013) on their understanding of iteration in terms of Kratzer (2008), as involving plural events. This idea contrasts with Landman and Rothstein’s (2010:251), for whom the iteration operation applies to the onset: “the onset event is big enough to be of the iteration event type.”

Let us now explore how this definition can account for the data presented in Table 1 of Appendix A.

We start by considering activities, as exemplified by the verbal event type *comprare* ‘to buy.’ Since the event type of the VP *comprare i tulipani* ‘to buy tulips’ is also an activity, we claim that the event type of the VP is incrementally homogeneous iff there is an onset of *e*, $O(e, \text{COMPRARE_I_TULIPANI})$ which is the smallest initial event in $\tau(e)$, which is big enough to count both as buying tulips and as cross-temporally identical to *e*: the onset is the first stage, where the incremental sequence of events cross-temporally identical to *e* reaches a stage big enough to count as buying tulips. The activity *comprare i tulipani* is homogeneous down to events or larger intervals, which count as buying tulips, an activity that most commonly involves buying more than one tulip (or even different tulips), and therefore an event iteration of buying tulips. As expected, *per* ‘for’ phrases modify activities, because they are cumulative (Krifka 1989), and the definite determiner of the internal argument does not block this modification, because the object DP is a property-type denoting expression.

Let us now proceed with states, namely possessive states, as exemplified by the verbal event type *avere* ‘to have.’ The event type of the VP *avere le pulci* ‘to have bugs,’ is also a state, and the event type of the VP is incrementally homogeneous iff there is an onset of *e*, $O(e, \text{AVERE_LE_PULCI})$, which is the smallest initial state in $\tau(e)$ that is big enough to count as there being bugs and as being cross-temporally identical to *e*, even though the reference of the object can be distinct in subsequent cross-temporal identical events. *Per* phrases apply felicitously to states such as *avere le pulci*, not because *le pulci* is a name of a kind, but because it is interpreted existentially (see (23)). Furthermore, for something to be a habitual eventuality, it is necessary that an iteration of states continues from an initial state.

Interestingly, the data in Table 1 also show that the range of VPs that allow modification by *per* phrases is not reduced to activities and stative predicates, but also includes accomplishments and achievements. In other words, *per* phrases show that the four classes of verbal event types can be atelic, and this comes as a challenge. Recall that activity predicates, as Landman and Rothstein (2010) say, are lexically constrained as being incrementally homogeneous down to *e*. Stative predicates are lexically constrained as being homogeneous down to instants. Accomplishments and achievements have been argued to be non-homogeneous (Bennett and Partee 1972; Dowty 1979), because they involve either a causative event followed by a result state, or a change of state. The prediction is that these two classes of verbal event types should discard *per* modifiers.

However, accomplishments in our Table 1 behave like activities. If the event type corresponding to the VP is an accomplishment, such as *spalare la neve* ‘to shovel (the) snow,’ then the event type of that VP is incrementally homogeneous iff there is an onset of *e*, $O(e, \text{SPALARE_LA_NEVE})$, and for every interval *i*, the running time of the onset of that event, $\tau(O(e, V))$, is an initial subinterval of *i*, which is included in the running time of that event: $\tau(e)$. Furthermore, for an eventuality of *spalare la neve* to be true, one needs to consider an incremental sequence of events cross-temporally identical to *e* and an initial event in $\tau(e)$, which is big enough to count both as shoveling the snow and as cross-temporally identical to *e*; and this is the case even considering that at every subevent *e*’ cross-temporally identical to *e*

different amounts of snow are removed with a shovel. The accomplishment *spalare la neve* is homogeneous down to complex eventualities (an external causing event followed by a final state), which count as shoveling the snow, and *per* phrases apply to these complex eventualities, which are cumulative. As expected, event iteration is also felicitous, as proved by *ogni* N modifiers.

Finally, let us consider achievements, as exemplified by the verbal event type *arrivare* ‘to arrive.’ Since the event type of the VP *arrivare i treni* ‘to arrive the trains’ is also an achievement, the event type of the VP is considered incrementally homogeneous iff there is an onset of *e*, the $O(e, ARRIVARE_I_TRENI)$, which is cross-temporally identical to *e*, which constitutes the smallest initial event in $\tau(e)$, which is big enough to count as there arriving several different trains. The achievement *arrivare i treni* is homogeneous down to complex eventualities (a change and a final state), which count as arriving trains, and once again *per* phrases apply to these complex eventualities, which are also conceived as being cumulative. In this case as well, event iteration is proved by *ogni* N modifiers.

Overall, the data in Table 1 show that not only activities and states, but accomplishments and achievements as well, behave as event types that manifest incremental homogeneity and iteration, as proved by *per* modifiers and *ogni* modifiers, respectively.

With this in mind, we can explain the (apparent) contrast noted by Donazzan and Gritti (2013), as reported in (7), and explain why it disappears in (8). The relevant examples are repeated below.

- (30) a. Maria mangiava *le*_{def/indef} *angurie*.
 Maria eat.3SG.IMP the watermelons
 ‘Maria used to eat watermelons.’
 (Donazzan and Gritti 2013: 184, (12))
 b. Maria ha mangiato *le*_{def/#indef} *angurie*.
 Maria AUX eat.PERF the watermelons
 ‘Maria ate #(the) watermelons.’
- (31) a. Sin da bambina, Maria ha (sempre) mangiato *le*_{def/indef}
 since of kid Maria AUX always eat.PERF the
angurie.
 watermelons
 ‘Since she was a child, Maria has (always) eaten watermelons.’
 b. Maria ha mangiato *l'*_{def/indef} *anguria*.
 Maria AUX eat.PERF the.watermelon
 ‘Maria ate watermelon.’

We have argued that IDs can potentially appear as internal arguments of all verbs across all aspectual classes, provided the resulting event is incrementally homogeneous. So why is the ID reading supposedly impossible in (30b)? We propose that this is because it is difficult to identify an initial onset of an event of eating a plurality of watermelons, which is small enough to be considered an initial sub-event, and simultaneously big enough to be cross-temporally identical to such event in an episodic context. In contrast, the extended time span described by the habitual sentence in (30a) facilitates the identification of an adequate initial, cross-temporally identical onset event $O(e, MANGIARE_LE_ANGURIE)$, which counts as an event

of eating a plurality of watermelons. Eating multiple watermelons typically takes a sequence of events within $\tau(e)$, and it typically extends over a longer time span.²²

Additionally, this hypothesis also explains the improvement of the ID reading in the habitual sentence with perfective aspect in (31a), also the previously unobserved availability of an indefinite reading in an episodic (and perfective) environment, when the same count noun *anguria* receives a mass denotation, as in (31b). In this case, it is unnecessary to identify an onset event of eating a plurality of watermelons, as a small onset event, where Maria eats just a small amount of watermelon suffices to count as the same cross-temporally identical event, allowing for a straightforward incrementally homogeneous interpretation of the VP in question.

So far, we have examined the grammatical conditions that license an indefinite reading for the definite article in Italian. Let us now move to our second research question, namely why Italian is special among Romance languages in allowing this construction.

5 The cross- and intra-linguistic puzzle

Firstly, is there a principled correlation between the absence of BNs in a given Italo-Romance variety and the preference for IDs in the same dialect? Through a small corpus search on two northern Italian dialects reported in Sect. 5.1, we observe that the variety with a more limited use of BNs displays a higher incidence of IDs when translating a BN in Italian into the corresponding dialect. These preliminary findings suggest that IDs may originally develop as a replacement for BNs in those dialects that lack this construction.

Secondly, why is that only Italian, but not French, Spanish, or Catalan, got to exhibiting the ID form? Framing our discussion on the bidirectional influence between Italo-Romance dialects and Italian in Sect. 5.2, we advance the reasonable conjecture that the use of IDs, originally born in the dialects, permeates the national language. This phenomenon is not attested in other Romance languages, presumably because either they do not interact with a rich dialectal substratum, which might have developed such form; or because they already possess two productive indefinite forms

²²A reviewer notes another case in which the ID seems unavailable once a habitual interpretation is blocked.

- (i) Rembrandt ha appena dipinto $i_{def}/\#i_{indef}$ capolavori.
 Rembrandt AUX just paint.PART the masterpieces
 Rembrandt just painted the masterpieces.'

However, the same restriction appears even in habitual environments (e.g., *#Rembrandt ha dipinto i capolavori per anni* 'Rembrandt painted the masterpieces for years'). In our theory, this incompatibility arises from the difficulty of identifying an initial subevent, which is long enough to count as painting more than one masterpiece. A masterpiece becomes such only when it is fully painted (and further validated by critics or the public), which is a process that, likely, may take many years. This makes it difficult to identify an adequate initial subevent, thereby blocking the ID interpretation in this context. In fact, the restriction observed by the reviewer appears to be lexically related to the N *capolavori*: *Rembrandt ha dipinto i_{def}/i_{indef} quadri per anni* 'Rembrandt has painted (the) paintings for years' drastically facilitates the ID interpretation.

(e.g., BNs and *un(o)s*, as in Spanish or Catalan), or they do not face any competition between indefinite constructions (as it is the case with French).

5.1 The ASIt data on two northern Italian regional dialects

Tackling the former question, and as an initial descriptive observation, notice that the possibility of licensing IDs seems to be widespread throughout the majority of dialects across the entire Italian peninsula. This observation has been particularly endorsed by Cardinaletti and Giusti (2018), through a close examination of three maps of the AIS atlas (*Sprach- und Sachatlas Italiens und der Südschweiz, Jahberg and Jud 1928–1940*). These maps contained instances of narrow scope weak indefinite nominal expressions (i.e., map 1037 [*if there was*] *water*; map 1343 [*go to the cellar*] *to take wine*; and map 637 [*to look for*] *violets*).²³ The presence of IDs is noted to coexist with other indefinite forms (e.g., *di*+ART) in most dialects, but it appears to be the exclusive choice in Central-South of Italy to Northern Calabria. This extensive presence of IDs has been corroborated, at least partially, by Pinzin and Poletto's (2021, 2022) investigation of Northern Italian dialects based on the *Atlante Sintattico d'Italia* (ASIt) and additional fieldwork.²⁴ In both cases, it is observed that areas in the extreme north and northeast of the peninsula exhibit a clear preference for BNs. This tendency is particularly pronounced in Veneto and Friuli, where speakers of the underlying dialects show a systematic use of this form.

In light of this geographical distribution, we would like to test the working hypothesis that the ID use is particularly pronounced in those varieties where BNs are less productive. That is, we hypothesize that the presence of IDs correlates with the absence of BNs in a given language. This would suggest that IDs develop as a replacing form to cover the unavailability of BNs. To test this working hypothesis, we selected two representative northern Italian regional dialects: a variety with a productive use of BNs (i.e., Venetan, spoken in the region of Veneto) and a variety that constrains the occurrence of this form (i.e., Lombard, spoken in Lombardia).²⁵ In

²³It is important to acknowledge that the atlas dates back to the early nineteenth century and is primarily designed as a lexical source, which complicates a thorough syntactic analysis of the data.

²⁴ASIt is freely accessible at <http://asit.maldura.unipd.it/>. This database contains data extracted from different questionnaires, in which speakers of various Italian dialects were asked to translate an Italian input into their respective dialect.

²⁵A reviewer has questioned the rationale behind this choice and the exclusion of other central and southern dialects from the investigation, especially considering that these varieties show a productive use of IDs (Cardinaletti and Giusti 2018, cf. Pinzin and Poletto 2021, 2022). Our reasons are diverse. Firstly, one of the authors is a speaker of a Lombard variety. In fact, the term “Lombard” is used to cover a quite heterogeneous array of Gallo-Romance dialects, no longer exclusively identified with Milanese. In this regard, Lombard is sometimes categorized between western Lombard (spoken in the provinces of Milan, Novara, Varese, Como, Sondrio, Canton Ticino) and eastern Lombard (spoken in the provinces of Bergamo and Brescia, along with the areas of Pavia, Cremona, Mantua and the peripheral Valtellina) (Sanga 1997: 253). Despite this heterogeneity, this group of languages has a common Gallo-Romance origin, and, accordingly, we expect it to display few BNs.

Venetan, in contrast, appears to be more homogeneous and it is often characterized by its *agallicità* (“non-Gallicness”) within the continuum of the northern Italian dialects (Zamboni 1988; Tuttle 1997). Hence, we expect it to disprefer *di*+ART nominals and use BNs instead. Secondly, we opted for regional varieties, rather than local ones, to expand the ASIt data pool significantly, achieving a sample size of more

particular, we examined the datapoints in the ASIIt corpus containing a BN in the Italian input to examine the respective translations in varieties with and without BNs. As mentioned, the straightforward expectation is that varieties licensing BNs would consistently translate an input containing this form with an output displaying the same form. On the other hand, dialects with fewer or no BNs are expected to produce more IDs in their translations.

The ASIIt corpus includes four entries shared by Lombard and Venetan, which contain a BN in the Italian input: (i) entry 66: *Non mangia mai frutta, quella ragazza* ('she never eats fruit, that girl'); (ii) entry 69: *Non comprano mai frutta, le mie sorelle* ('they never buy fruit, my sisters'); (iii) entry 73: *Non compri mai mele* ('you never buy apples'); and (iv) entry 74: *Non mangiamo mai frutta* ('we never eat fruit').²⁶ See the [Appendix](#) for details on the outputs of the translation task.

Regarding Venetan, the results are quite compelling. As expected, speakers of this variety consistently translated an input containing a BN in Italian into the same form in their dialect. In all four entries, the outputs with a BN comprise around 90% of the total outputs. Additionally, they use IDs sparingly, constituting about 10% of the total outputs in three out of the four entries.

The outputs in Lombard are less straightforward. First, it is important to acknowledge that the data pool for Lombard is smaller compared to that of Veneto. Moreover, the outcomes appear to be more diverse, with speakers seemingly falling into two types: those that choose the BN form of the input, and those that prefer the definite article with an indefinite interpretation. Notably, however, the comparison with the results of Veneto is revealing. While in the Venetan case, occurrences of IDs were marginal, having a mean of 8.55% and reaching a maximum of 11% in input 73, in Lombard, they show a mean of 54.39% and reach a maximum of 65% in input 69. This reveals a clear tendency to translate BNs into IDs in this language.

As for the relatively surprising high occurrence of BNs in Lombard, different plausible explanations must be considered. Firstly, the Lombard variety is more heterogeneous than the Venetan one (as mentioned in footnote 25), which would predict a higher fluctuation in the results. Secondly, it is worth noting that participants engaged in translation tasks tend to translate a structure present in the input—BNs in the case at hand—with the same structure in the output, even if such structure is not *a priori* available in the target grammar. Moreover, with no access to detailed sociolinguistic information of the participants, another possibility is that these speakers are

than 160 speakers for Venetan, and over 40 for Lombard. This larger sample enables us to establish more robust empirical observations. Thirdly, the speakers we consulted for the data in Table 1 came precisely from these areas. Lastly, the exclusion of central and southern varieties stems from the lack of a valid representation in the ASIIt atlas. However, considering Anconetano, a variety spoken in the Ancona province in the Marche, which is known to entirely lack BNs (Cardinaletti and Giusti 2016, 2018), the findings provide even stronger support for our hypothesis. The ASIIt data for Anconetano includes only 7 entries with an Italian BN. Crucially, all the translations unanimously display an ID.

²⁶The ASIIt data pool has limitations of various sorts. Entries containing a BN are quite scarce, and all of them involve negation. Though this ensures a narrow scope interpretation of the indefinite nominal expression, it does in fact introduce an undesirable bias in the interpretation of the nominal. Furthermore, the four data points only feature two verbs (i.e., *buy* and *eat*) with two bare nominal direct objects (i.e., *fruit* and *apples*). Beyond that, the corpus gathers the responses of few speakers, who did not provide a reply to all the inputs. For lack of an alternative, we comment on these data, but further empirical research should be carried out.

simply more exposed to Italian and use it more often in their communicative acts, to the extent that it constitutes their dominant language. As a final remark, notice that only one example of *di*+ART nominals was found in the Lombard data pool, which suggests that this form does not directly compete with the BN and the ID due to its being specialized for specificity also in such Gallo-Romance variety (see footnote 3 and the discussion in the following section). This specialization is likely a result of the influence of the national language over the dialect.

Setting aside these considerations, a compelling pattern and a clear tendency emerges from the data we have just outlined. Whereas speakers from Veneto, a variety in which BNs are predominant, consistently use BNs in their translations, speakers of Lombard are prone to replace this form with IDs.

5.2 Why only Italian?

In response to the second question, namely what makes Italian unique among Romance languages concerning the presence of IDs, we can only advance a conjecture, which we believe, however, to be highly plausible. We hypothesize that the use of IDs—which likely originated in certain Italo-Romance dialectal varieties as a replacing form for BNs, as suggested by the results of the previous section—has permeated the national language. In particular, to account for the presence of IDs in Italian, we rely on the coexistence of competing grammars, in a slightly different sense from that originally proposed by Kroch (1994, 2001).²⁷ Here, we emphasize the relevance of the role of dialects in the diachronic development of Italian by giving special importance to the coexistence of competing patterns arising from the constant language/dialect contact.²⁸ Speakers of regional varieties are often influenced by the underlying dialect of their geographical area, even if they are not speakers of such dialect (Cardinaletti and Giusti 2020; Lebani and Giusti 2022; Molinari 2022; Procentese et al. 2024). Intriguingly, situations of this sort, where two languages with different sociolinguistic statuses—but grammatically similar—interact, are often described by the term “bi(dia)lectalism” (Grohmann and Leivada 2012; Rowe and Grohmann 2013). In such contexts, the boundaries between the two varieties become blurred, leading to a high degree of grammatical hybridism. This results in the incorporation of forms from both varieties into a single grammatical system, causing equivalent constructions to compete within the same syntactic and semantic environments (Leivada et al. 2017; Grohmann et al. 2020).²⁹

²⁷Traditionally, the concept of competing grammars has been employed to account for parametric differences (e.g., head-directionality) in language change.

²⁸The impact of the dialects on the national language—both in its formal and informal registers—has already been explored, for instance, in relation to so-called “phrasal verbs” in Italian (Benincà and Poletto 2006; Iacobini 2009). In these works, the argument is made that the higher presence of these constructions in Italian—unexpected under Talmy’s (2000) typology and in comparison to other Romance languages—is not due to the influence of Germanic languages over northern dialects, as often suggested. Instead, it is attributed to the influence of the dialects themselves, which already featured phrasal verbs in the 13th century.

²⁹This apparent optionality between two forms is also reminiscent of Barra-Jover’s (2011: 82) notion of “invisible variation,” according to which the same speaker can use variants a_1 and a_2 for the structure A without being aware of it, without it depending on the situation, and without the interlocutor being able to perceive or interpret the existence of an alternation.

In the case at hand, we specifically posit that speakers of Italian (and their local dialect) have two competing patterns for expressing weak indefiniteness: BNs and IDs. We hold that *di*+ART nominals are excluded from such competition due to their specialization for specificity and strong indefiniteness. However, as a reviewer correctly points out, *di*+ART nominals are not entirely precluded from expressing non-specific readings. We acknowledge this, especially for speakers from areas where the underlying dialects do not allow BNs (Cardinaletti and Giusti 2016, Giusti p.c.) and whose dialectal grammar is therefore closer to that of French, rather than that of standard Italian (but see however the results in Appendix B). Yet, two additional arguments support the specialization of Italian *di*+ART nominals for specificity / strong indefiniteness. First, *di*+ART indefinites are not acceptable in sentences denoting “habitual long-term activities” (Pinzin and Poletto 2021), which describe activities that take place throughout a long span of time. This is illustrated in the following example:

- (32) Costruisco (*delle) case da 30 anni, ma una così brutta non
 build.1.SG.PRES *di*+ART houses from 30 years but one so ugly Not
 l’ho mai vista.
 CL.AUX never see.PART
 ‘I’ve been building (*some) houses for 30 years, but I’ve never seen such an
 ugly one.’ [adapted from Pinzin and Poletto 2021: 17, (12)–(13)]

Di+ART indefinites cannot appear in (32), because their presence would imply that the speaker has been building the same set of houses for 30 years, which is an infelicitous interpretation.

Second, more empirical evidence comes from a questionnaire run in Cardinaletti and Giusti (2020), where Italian speakers provided acceptability judgments for sentences with different indefinite nominal expressions. Notably, in a context forcing a narrow scope interpretation of an indefinite nominal expression, such as in the negative habitual sentence *I don’t eat potatoes*, only 3 out of 82 participants accepted the *di*+ART form (33a).³⁰ The rest of participants preferred either a BN (33b), an ID (33c), or both.

- (33) a. Non mangio delle patate.
 not eat.1SG.PRES *di*+ART potatoes
 b. Non mangio patate.
 not eat.1SG.PRES potatoes

³⁰This specialization for a wide scope, specific reading with respect to negation, is reminiscent of that of Spanish (and Catalan) indefinite *un(o)s*, which led Martí (2008, 2009) to analyze such forms as positive polarity items. However, this cannot be the correct analysis neither for Spanish (Espinal and Cyrino 2022a), nor for Italian. As (ia) and (ib) show both forms are compatible with a narrow and a wide scope interpretation.

- (i) a. No encontré unos locales adecuados. $\neg > \exists / \exists > \neg$
 not find.1SG.PAST some premises suitable
 (Espinal and Cyrino 2022a: 19, ex. (27c))
 b. Non ho trovato dei locali adeguati. $\neg > \exists / \exists > \neg$
 not AUX find.1SG.PART *di*+ART premises suitable
 ‘There are some suitable premises I didn’t find. /I didn’t find any suitable premises.’

- c. Non mangio *le patate*.
 not eat.1SG.PRES the potatoes
 Intended reading: 'I don't eat potatoes.'

This evidence, we argue, supports our argument that the two competing forms for the expression of weak indefiniteness in Italian are BNs and IDs, to the exclusion of *di*+ART.

What role do IDs concretely play, then? In the preceding section, we argued that IDs seem to replace BNs in dialects that lack the latter. The presence of IDs in these dialects might then be transferred to the national language. Speakers of dialects lacking BNs adopt the alternative form of IDs from the dialect and use it in informal settings. In other words, IDs come into play in those varieties without BNs. This use might spread across the territory, gaining frequency until it permeates the national language as a consequence of the constant language/dialect contact. Even if this remains a conjecture, the situation just described is typical in bilingual environments: two forms—often equivalent and pertaining to the grammar of the national language and to the grammar of the dialect—often concur and compete in the same syntactic and semantic environments within the highly hybridized grammar of speakers of both varieties. Specifically, we propose that IDs and BNs—analyzed here as having the same structural configuration (along with *di*+ART; see the structures in (26))—compete in internal argument positions, provided the resulting event allows for an incrementally homogeneous interpretation. This competition provides a natural explanation for the overlapping syntactic distribution of IDs and BNs, namely their occurrence in the complement position of lexical heads, and their parallel interpretation, characterized by narrow scope, non-specificity, and weak indefiniteness.

This theorizing may also shed light on why this phenomenon occurs in Italian (and some Italo-Romance varieties), but not in other Romance languages that do not license argumental BNs, such as French. We argue that this difference arises, because the grammar of the dialect of a speaker of Italo-Romance varieties competes with that of formal / standard Italian, whereas, generally speaking, speakers of French do not have access to any similar competing alternative pattern.³¹ Recall that Italian, unlike French, allows argumental BNs. This implies that at least one of the competing grammars accessible to an Italian speaker from a geographical area where BNs are absent in the local dialect does, in fact, include this form. When such speaker needs to express weak indefiniteness in either the dialect or the national (informal / popular) language, they may choose either the BN (available in formal / standard Italian) or the ID (available in the regional / local dialect). Crucially, both forms are viable possibilities. Such is the case, given the postulated structures in (26) for Romance in-

³¹ A reviewer wonders why Spanish (or Catalan) is not mentioned in this discussion, and why it shouldn't end up using IDs as well. Spanish and Catalan, along with all underlying Ibero-Romance varieties, possess a stable and productive weak indefinite form, namely BNs, alongside a form specialized for strong indefiniteness, namely *un(o)s* (which, however, is not precluded from non-specific readings, as also pointed out in footnote 30). Therefore, the productivity and stability of BNs in Spanish and Catalan prevent the necessity for adopting IDs. This contrasts with Italian, where the lack of a robust presence of BNs in certain dialectal varieties leads to the incorporation of IDs into the national language.

definites, with the difference between IDs and BNs being a matter of overt or covert *spell out* of the lower D head.³²

A reviewer meticulously observes that one might wonder why Italo-Romance varieties specifically chose the ID form, given that the bare *di* + *N* configuration is also a potential phonological realization of Espinal and Cyrino's (2022a, b) structure. Interestingly, there are some dialects, particularly in southern Piedmont, Liguria, and Northern Tuscany—~areas highly influenced by French—which use such form to convey weak indefiniteness (Battye 1990; Cardinaletti and Giusti 2018; Pinzin and Poletto 2021). However, for the general preference of the ID form, we argue that there is a concrete grammatical reason for this choice. The presence or absence of a BN in a language has been correlated with the presence or absence of overt rich morphological number marking on the noun (see especially Delfitto and Schrotten 1991; Stark 2007, 2008; Crisma and Longobardi 2020; Guardiano et al. 2022; Pinzin and Poletto 2022). Languages with rich morphological exponence on Ns, such as Spanish and Catalan, which have a dedicated bound morpheme *-s* to encode plural number, license the presence of BNs. Conversely, languages without overt morphological plural marking on the noun, such as French, cannot license BNs and must realize number explicitly on the determiner (e.g., *des*-phrases) instead. Intriguingly, Lombard varieties generally pattern like French in this respect, as shown in (34).

- (34) Te comprat mai {*ul* *pom/ i* *pom*}
 you buy...2SG.PRES never the.SG apple the.PL apples
 ‘You never buy {the apple / (the) apples}.’

In Lombard, no explicit number marking is found on the noun (as attested by the invariable form *pom* ‘apple’), making the lack of BNs expected. Consequently, it is also expected that such varieties would resort to IDs to express the same meaning. Recall in this sense that in Espinal and Cyrino's (2022a, b) structure in (26a), D (or *d*) is the only head syntactically specified for number in Romance.³³

In summary, we have proposed a plausible conjecture for the intra-linguistic and cross-linguistic puzzles arising from the indefinite interpretation for the morphologically definite article in Italo-Romance, a phenomenon not observed in other closely related languages. We have shown that IDs are notably prevalent in Ital-

³²It is worth noting an interesting cross-linguistic correlation with a genetically unrelated language, namely Basque (as also pointed out in Leonetti 2019, referring to Etxeberria 2010). In its current state, almost all varieties of Basque lack BNs and instead use IDs to express weak indefiniteness. Notably, Etxeberria (2021) observes that BNs were in fact present in old Basque. As this form was diachronically lost, speakers of Basque replaced it with IDs. This observation is supported by Souletin, traditionally considered the most conservative variety of Basque, and therefore representing an old version of the language. Intriguingly, this variant preserves BNs, but does not license IDs. In our view, this pattern aligns well with the general diachronic perspective outlined in this paper in terms of competing grammars. As Kroch (1994: 6) points out, doublets such as those observed in Italian and in Basque—pairs of parallel forms with identical semantic import, in our terms—compete in usage until one succeeds and replaces the other. This is what happened in Basque, as shown by Etxeberria (2021), and this is what seems to be occurring in contemporary Italian.

³³This also supports the view that Number is morphologically realized on the determiner in Romance (as proposed by Bouchard 2002; Dobrovie-Sorin 2012; Cyrino and Espinal 2020).

ian dialects, where BNs are not used, presumably as a replacement form. This usage has likely permeated the national language through dialect and language contact, reaching the majority of speakers. This perspective helps unravel the complex landscape of the expression of indefiniteness in Italian, aptly termed an “indefinite maze” by Pinzin and Poletto (2022). We suggest that the three available indefinite forms found in (in)formal Italian and dialectal varieties—namely BNs, IDs, and *di*+ART—compete and distribute themselves to cover the whole spectrum of indefiniteness. *Di*+ART indefinites specialize for specificity and strong indefiniteness, whereas BNs and IDs compete for the expression of weak indefiniteness.

6 Conclusions

This paper has explored the phenomenon of indefinite interpretations associated with morphologically definite articles preceding plural count and mass nouns in Italian. First, we have presented evidence that IDs, like BNs, can only occur in internal argument position of all aspectual classes of verbs. Furthermore, we have observed a productive use of IDs in habitual, iterative, and atelic contexts, irrespective of the perfective / imperfective aspectual dichotomy.

In reviewing the existing literature, we have critically examined three predominant trends of analysis of IDs, demonstrating that these constructions (i) should not be assimilated to WDs; (ii) do not function as kind-denoting definite descriptions; and (iii) cannot derive the existential reading from their alleged primary kind denotation. Instead, we have proposed an account that aligns with the unified structure for Romance plural and mass indefinites postulated by Espinal and Cyrino’s (2022a, 2022b). Under this analysis, indefiniteness in Romance arises from a type-shifting indefinite operator DE, which is merged on top of a definite determiner. This operator turns a definite description (of type $\langle e \rangle$) into a property-type expression (of type $\langle e, t \rangle$), which predicates over the variable introduced by the existential quantifier of the VP existential closure operation in the nuclear scope. Additionally, we have argued that the observed productivity in habitual, iterative, and atelic *per* ‘for’ modifier contexts can be attributed to the requirement that IDs occur as internal arguments of predicates denoting incrementally homogeneous events.

Lastly, we addressed the intra- and cross-linguistic puzzles associated with the distribution of IDs, BNs, and *di*+ART for the expression of indefiniteness in Italian (and its dialectal varieties), as opposed to other Romance languages. Through a small corpus research on two northern Italo-Romance regional dialects, we have shown that the use of IDs is more prevalent—presumably as a replacement form—in the dialectal variety that employs less BNs. Moreover, we have discussed the hypothesis that this use has permeated the national language due to the bidirectional influence coming from Italian and its dialects on speakers of these languages. This might shed light on why only informal Italian, as opposed to other Romance languages, employs IDs.

Appendix A

Table 1 Distribution of IDs depending on four different aspectual classes of verbs (column 1), two examples per verb class (column 2), a perfective / imperfective aspectual distinction (column 3), a habitual (and iterative) verbal context (column 4), and a temporal *per* / *in* modification (columns 5 and 6, respectively).

Classes of verbs	Examples	Perfective/ imperfective	Habitual (iterative)	Temporal modifiers (<i>per</i>)	Temporal modifiers (<i>in</i>)
Activities	<i>Comprare i tulipani</i>	- La mamma ha comprato $i_{\text{def/indef}}$ tulipani. - La mamma comprava $i_{\text{def/indef}}$ tulipani (mentre io aspettavo fuori)	- La mamma compra $i_{\text{def/indef}}$ tulipani (tutti i giorni) da oltre un anno.	- La mamma ha comprato $i_{\text{def/indef}}$ tulipani (per giorni).	- La mamma ha comprato $i_{\text{def/indef}}$ tulipani (in dieci minuti)
	<i>Preparare il pane</i>	- Gianni ha preparato $il_{\text{def/indef}}$ pane. - Gianni preparava $il_{\text{def/indef}}$ pane (mentre Maria preparava $i_{\text{def/indef}}$ biscotti).	- Gianni prepara $il_{\text{def/indef}}$ pane (ogni giorno) da quando è bambino.	- Gianni ha preparato $il_{\text{def/indef}}$ pane (per ore).	- Gianni ha preparato $il_{\text{def/indef}}$ pane (in un'ora)
Accomplishments	<i>Raccogliere i pomodori</i>	- Quel contadino ha raccolto $i_{\text{def/indef}}$ pomodori. - Quel contadino raccoglieva $i_{\text{def/indef}}$ pomodori (mentre la moglie raccoglieva $le_{\text{def/indef}}$ patate)	- Quel contadino raccoglie $i_{\text{def/indef}}$ pomodori (ogni estate) da quando è bambino.	- Quel contadino ha raccolto $i_{\text{def/indef}}$ pomodori (per un'ora)	- Quel contadino ha raccolto $i_{\text{def/indef}}$ pomodori (in un'ora)
	<i>Spalare la neve</i>	- Il mio vicino ha spalato $la_{\text{def/indef}}$ neve. - Il mio vicino spalava $la_{\text{def/indef}}$ neve.	- Il mio vicino spala $la_{\text{def/indef}}$ neve (ogni inverno) da quando ci siamo trasferiti.	- Il mio vicino ha spalato $la_{\text{def/indef}}$ neve (per ore).	- Il mio vicino ha spalato $la_{\text{def/indef}}$ neve (in due ore).
Achievements	<i>Arrivare i treni</i>	- Sono arrivati $i_{\text{def/?indef}}$ treni. - Arrivavano $i_{\text{def/indef}}$ treni (mentre aspettavo in stazione).	- In questo paese arrivano $i_{\text{def/indef}}$ treni (ogni cinque minuti) da trent'anni.	- Sono arrivati $i_{\text{def/indef}}$ treni (per ore)	- Sono arrivati $i_{\text{def/indef}}$ treni (in tre minuti)
	<i>Ottenere il petrolio</i>	- [...] I cinesi e i birmani avevano già ottenuto $il_{\text{def/indef}}$ petrolio scavando pozzi. ¹ - I cinesi e i birmani ottenevano $il_{\text{def/indef}}$ petrolio scavando pozzi prima del XVII secolo.	- I cinesi e i birmani ottengono $il_{\text{def/indef}}$ petrolio scavando pozzi (ogni anno) da decenni.	- I cinesi e i birmani hanno ottenuto $il_{\text{def/indef}}$ petrolio scavando pozzi (per anni).	- I cinesi e i birmani hanno ottenuto $il_{\text{def/indef}}$ petrolio scavando pozzi (in un giorno).

Table 1 (Continued)

Classes of verbs	Examples	Perfective/ imperfective	Habitual (iterative)	Temporal modifiers (<i>per</i>)	Temporal modifiers (<i>in</i>)
States	<i>Esserci le cimici dei letti</i>	- A Parigi ci sono state le _{def/indef} cimici dei letti. - C'erano le _{#def/indef} cimici dei letti a Parigi.	- A Parigi ci sono le _{#def/indef} cimici dei letti (ogni anno) da dieci anni.	- A Parigi ci sono state le _{#def/indef} cimici dei letti (per anni).	- #A Parigi ci sono state le _{def/indef} cimici dei letti (in un anno).
	<i>Avere le pulci</i>	- Ho avuto le _{def/indef} pulci in casa. - Ho avuto le _{def/indef} pulci in casa.	- Ho avuto le _{#def/indef} pulci in casa (ogni anno) per oltre dieci anni.	- Ho avuto le _{#def/indef} pulci in casa (per anni).	- #Ho avuto le _{def/indef} pulci in casa (in un anno).

¹ Example extracted from <https://www.epertutti.com/ricerche/Il-petrolio23821.php> on December 19th, 2023

Appendix B: On ASIt outputs

The *Atlante Sintattico d'Italia (ASIt)* is a database hosted by the Università di Padova and Università di Venezia, freely accessible at <http://asit.maldura.unipd.it/>. This database contains data from various Italian dialects, collected through different questionnaires, which asked speakers to translate Italian sentences into their respective dialects. For the data presented in this [Appendix](#), we initially narrowed our focus to the regions of Veneto and Lombardy using the appropriate search menu. Subsequently, we selected the tag *ogg indef* (indicating “indefinite direct object”). This search returned 32 results for both Lombardy and Veneto. From these results we ultimately selected only four entries, as detailed below, which contained a bare nominal direct object in the Italian input. The search was conducted in December, 2023.

Venetan

- (1) 66: *Non mangia mai frutta, quella ragazza* ‘She never eats fruit, that girl.’
 - Total outputs: 164/165 99.40%
 - Outputs with BNs 156/165 94.55%
 - Outputs with IDs 4/165 2.4%
 - Output *di* +art 1/165 0.61%
 - Output with *un pomo* 1/165 0.61%
 - Output with *manco un fruto* 1/165 0.61%
 - Output with *un fia de fruta* 1/165 0.61%
 - No output 1/165 0.61%
- (2) 69: *Non comprano mai frutta, le mie sorelle* ‘They never buy fruit, my sisters.’
 - Total outputs 159/160 99.37%
 - Output with BNs 143/160 89.37%
 - Outputs with IDs 16/160 10%
 - No output 1/160 0.63%

- (3) 73: *Non compri mai mele* ‘You never buy apples.’
- Total outputs 160/161 99.38%
 - Outputs with BNs 141/161 87.58%
 - Outputs with IDs 18/161 11.18%
 - Output with *di*+art 1/161 0.62%
 - No output 1/161 0.62%
- (4) 74: *Non mangiano mai frutta* ‘They never eat fruit.’
- Total outputs 159/160 99.37%
 - Outputs with BNs 141/160 88.13%
 - Outputs with IDs 17/160 10.63%
 - Outputs with *di*+art 1/160 0.62%
 - No output 1/160 0.62%

Lombard

- (5) 66: *Non mangia mai frutta, quella ragazza* ‘She never eats fruit, that girl.’
- Total outputs: 39/40 97.5%
 - Outputs with BNs: 15/40 37.5%
 - Outputs with IDs: 22/40 55%
 - Other outputs (bare *di*(?)) 2/40 5%
 - No output 1/40 2.5%
- (6) 69: *Non comprano mai frutta, le mie sorelle* ‘They never buy fruit, my sisters.’
- Total outputs 38/40 95%
 - Output with BNs 11/40 27.5%
 - Output with IDs 26/40 65%
 - Output with bare *di* 1/40 2.5%
 - Other input 1/40 2.5%
 - No output 1/40 2.5%
- (7) 73: *Non compri mai mele* ‘You never buy apples.’
- Total outputs 40/41 97.57%
 - Outputs with BNs 15/41 36.58%
 - Outputs with IDs 22/41 53.66%
 - Outputs with bare *di* 3(?)/41 7.31%
 - No output 1/41 2.44%
- (8) 74: *Non mangiano mai frutta* ‘They never eat fruit.’
- Total outputs 40/41 97.57%
 - Outputs with BNs 20/41 48.78%
 - Outputs with IDs 18/41 43.90%
 - Outputs with *di*+art 1/41 2.44%
 - Outputs with *briccha de fruta* 1/41 2.44%
 - No output 1/41 2.44%

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Declarations

Competing Interests The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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