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ON THE STATUS OF THE PARTITIVE DETERMINER IN ITALIAN*

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1. *Introduction: Bare Partitives*

Consider the object NPs in the sentences in (1):

- (1) a. *Ho incontrato degli studenti.*
have.1.SG met of the students
“I met some students.” (Italian)
- b. *Ho bevuto della birra.*
have.1.SG drunk of the beer
“I drank some beer.” (Italian)
- c. *J' ai rencontré des étudiants.*
I have met of the students
“I met some students.” (French)
- d. *J' ai bu de la bière.*
I have drunk of the beer
“I drank some beer.” (French)

Traditional grammars of French or Italian treat NPs of this type as more or less ordinary indefinite NPs: the noun is preceded by an indefinite determiner – the *partitive determiner* – and the whole NP receives an indefinite interpretation.¹

As shown by the glosses in (1), these NPs seem to be morphologically related to partitive NPs: the partitive determiner can be taken to be a complex morpheme composed of the partitive preposition *de/di* and the definite article. This

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¹ I do not distinguish between NP and DP in this paper.

morphological similarity is left unexplained under the traditional assumption that the morpheme that precedes the noun is a lexical determiner.

The only difference between the NPs in (1) and partitive NPs like those in the parallel examples in (2) seems to be that no quantifier or numeral appears before the complex morpheme that precedes the noun.

- (2) a. *Ho incontrato due degli studenti.*
 have.1.SG met two of the students
 “I met two of the students.” (Italian)
- b. *Ho bevuto metà della birra.*
 have.1.SG drunk half of the beer
 “I drank half of the beer.” (Italian)
- c. *J’ ai rencontré deux des étudiants.*
 I have met two of the students
 “I met two of the students.” (French)
- d. *J’ ai bu la moitié de la bière.*
 I have drunk half of the beer
 “I drank half of the beer.” (French)

Building on these morphological properties – and following Chierchia (1998) – let’s adopt the label *bare partitives* (BPs) to refer to the class of NPs in (1).²

The issue dealt with in this paper is the following: does the apparent morphological similarity between BPs and (full) partitives shed light on the nature of the partitive determiner? can we argue that the partitive determiner is the morphological composition of the partitive preposition and the definite article?

I address these questions by examining the interpretive properties of BPs in Italian. Interpretive data bear on the above questions under the following basic assumption: the semantic interpretation of a phrase is compositionally derived in terms of the semantic interpretation of the parts it is composed of and in terms of the way in which these are combined. For the case at hand this assumption leads to the expectation that if the partitive determiner is the composition of the partitive preposition and the definite determiner, BPs should display those semantic properties that, in (full) partitive NPs, can be attributed to the contribution of the partitive preposition or to that of the definite article.

As a preview, the conclusions of this investigation are that Italian BPs fail this test: NPs of this type do not display interpretive properties that one would expect

² As will become clear later in the paper, this does not mean that I agree with Chierchia’s proposal that BPs are partitive NPs. I adopt Chierchia’s terminology because the only alternative I know of – *des/du-NPs* (e.g. Bosveld-de Smet 1998; Roy 2001) – is less “compact” and, while being quite transparent to define the relevant class of NPs in French, is much less so when used to refer to Italian BPs.

to correlate with the interpretation of the partitive preposition and of the definite article. This, I suggest, is an argument for doubting that the partitive determiner is the morphological composition of the partitive preposition and the definite article.

In the first part of this paper I outline some basic interpretive properties of Italian BPs (§2), and introduce Chierchia's (1998) analysis of Italian BPs and discuss how it accounts for these properties (§3). In the second part of the paper I present empirical evidence arguing against Chierchia's conclusion that Italian BPs are *unambiguously* true partitives (§4), and point to further empirical evidence arguing that even the weaker conclusion that Italian BPs can be *ambiguously* analyzed as true partitives cannot be maintained (§5). I thus propose to maintain the hypothesis that the partitive determiner is a lexical indefinite determiner (§6).

2. *Are Italian BPs partitive NPs?*

The hypothesis that BPs are a particular type of partitive NP is, at first sight, compatible with the general observation that both in French and in Italian BPs are interpreted as indefinite NPs. In full partitives the quantificational force of the whole NP is determined by the quantifier/numeral that precedes the partitive preposition, thus the indefinite interpretation of BPs can be accounted for by arguing that the absence of an overt determiner before the partitive preposition triggers an existential interpretation of the whole NP.

However, it is known that partitives headed by an indefinite determiner – differently from other indefinites – are interpreted necessarily as *presuppositional strong* indefinites: they display a series of semantic properties that distinguish them from non-partitive indefinite NPs in general, and weak indefinites in particular. If BPs are partitive NPs they should display the same semantic properties that characterize (full) partitives as presuppositional strong NPs.³

2.1. *A note on French BPs*

It has been argued in various places in the literature (Delfitto 1993; Roy 2001, a.o.) that BPs in French are not partitive NPs, because they display interpretive properties – e.g. obligatory narrow scope with respect to other operators and well-formedness in existential *there* constructions – that are parallel to the properties displayed by *bare nouns* (BNs) in those Romance languages (e.g. Italian, Spanish)

³ The proper characterization of the weak/strong distinction is still a matter of debate in the literature (for a brief overview see McNally & van Geenhoven 1998). For present purposes the only crucial detail is that the ability to interact scopally with other operators, which weak indefinites lack, is partially independent from the presuppositionality that characterizes (some) strong – i.e. non-weak – indefinites (partitives, in particular). That is, the possibility is left open that certain indefinites do not qualify as weak in that they can interact scopally with other operators but still are not necessarily presuppositional.

that license this second type of NP. These properties argue that French BPs are weak non-presuppositional indefinites, which rules out the possibility of analyzing these NPs as partitives.⁴

2.2. Italian BPs vs. Italian BNs

The case of Italian BPs is more controversial. Indeed, as shown by Chierchia (1998), Italian BPs are *not* necessarily interpreted as weak indefinites: they display interpretive properties that differentiate them from BNs, which instead display the typical properties associated with weak indefinites.

- (3) a. *Non ho visto ragazzi.*
not have.1.SG seen boys
“I haven’t seen boys.” $\checkmark \neg > \exists ; * \exists > \neg$
- b. *Non ho visto un ragazzo.*
not have.1.SG seen a boy
“I haven’t seen a boy.” $\checkmark \neg > \exists ; \checkmark \exists > \neg$
- c. *Non ho visto dei ragazzi.*
not have.1.SG seen of the boys
“I haven’t seen any/some boys.” $\checkmark \neg > \exists ; \checkmark \exists > \neg$

In Italian BNs cannot scope above other operators in the sentence (3a) – a property that Chierchia calls *scopelessness* – but other indefinites in general (3b), and BPs in particular (3c), can do so. This observation, albeit sufficient to exclude the hypothesis that Italian BPs *must* be interpreted as weak indefinites, does not force the conclusion that they are *presuppositional* NPs.

Additional data discussed by Chierchia, however, seem to lead to the conclusion that Italian BPs must be interpreted as presuppositional indefinites.

- (4) a. *Non ci sono folletti.*
not there are.3.PL elves
“There are no elves.” [locative or existential]
- b. *Non ci sono dei folletti.*
not there are.3.PL of the elves
“There are no elves.” [locative only]

⁴ Ileana Comorovski, Petra Sleeman, and an anonymous reviewer (among others) pointed out to me that the French facts are more complex, and some of the data proposed to support the conclusion that French BPs are weak indefinites do not seem to survive further scrutiny. It is not my intention to address the problem of the interpretation of French BPs in any detail (see Bosveld-de Smet 1998 for a thorough discussion of French BPs). Above I just intend to point out that even the (probably incomplete) set of data that support the hypothesis that French BPs are weak indefinites cannot be reproduced in Italian.

- c. *Non ci sono dei folletti capaci di tanto.*
 not there are.3.PL of the elves capable of so much
 “There are no elves that are capable. . .” [*locative or existential*]

The *there* sentence in (4b) licenses only one of two interpretations licensed by the parallel *there* sentence in (4a). Both (4a) and (4b) can mean that no elves are in a particular (contextually specified) place, a statement which is compatible with the existence of elves in some other place; but only (4a) can alternatively convey the stronger statement that elves do not exist altogether.

This difference can be explained along the lines of Zucchi (1993): existential *there* sentences are infelicitous in those contexts where the intersection of the set denoted by the N' in the postcopular NP and the set denoted by the *coda* is already entailed to be empty or non-empty in the context. The prediction follows that presuppositional NPs – NPs that introduce presuppositions on the set denoted by the N' – can be used in existential *there* sentences only when a coda is present such that the intersection between the set denoted by the coda and the set denoted by the N' is not already entailed to be empty or non-empty.

No coda is present in (4b), thus the unavailability of the existential interpretation must be due to the presuppositional nature of the postcopular NP *dei folletti*.⁵ The incompatibility of Italian BPs with the existential interpretation of *there* sentences leads to the conclusion that these NPs are necessarily interpreted as presuppositional indefinites.

3. Chierchia's (1998) proposal

Summarizing, the interpretive facts about Italian BPs do not immediately rule out the possibility that they are a type of partitive NP. If anything, the facts in (4) seem to argue that Italian BPs are presuppositional indefinites, a property that characterizes (indefinite) full partitives as well.

Building on the facts in (3) and (4) Chierchia (1998) argues that BPs in Italian are true partitive NPs: the partitive determiner is the morpho-syntactic composition of the partitive preposition and the definite determiner, and the interpretation of BPs is compositional in the sense that the semantics of the partitive preposition and of the definite determiner contribute in a transparent way to the semantics of the whole NP.

⁵ The presence of a coda in (4c) explains the availability of the existential interpretation, in contrast to (4b). Plausibly, the locative interpretation of *there* sentences corresponds to the existential interpretation with the introduction of an implicit coda corresponding to the location.

3.1. *Syntax*

Chierchia proposes that BPs in Italian are structurally like full partitive NPs, and differ from the latter only in that they are headed by an empty determiner:

- (5) a. *alcuni dei folletti*

$$[_{DP_1} [_{D_1} \text{alcuni}] [_{NP_1} [_{N_1} \emptyset_{[+part]}] [_{PP} \text{di} [_{DP_2} [_{D_2} i] [_{NP_2} \text{folletti}]]]]]]]$$
 b. *dei folletti*

$$[_{DP_1} [_{D_1} \text{--}] [_{NP_1} [_{N_1} \emptyset_{[+part]}] [_{PP} \text{di} [_{DP_2} [_{D_2} i] [_{NP_2} \text{folletti}]]]]]]]$$

$$[_{DP_1} [_{D_1} \text{dei}] [_{NP_1} [_{N_1} t] [_{PP} t [_{DP_2} [_{D_2} t] [_{NP_2} \text{folletti}]]]]]]]$$

The higher determiner position in BPs is filled by syntactic movement of material from a lower position in the structure: the article incorporates into the preposition, then the resulting complex incorporates into the phonologically empty noun $\emptyset_{[+part]}$, and finally the result incorporates into the higher determiner position.

3.2. *Semantics*

The semantics of BPs is built compositionally from the semantics of the elements that are present in the structure in (5b). Chierchia assumes that the preposition *di* is semantically empty and that the *part-of* relation that characterizes the interpretation of partitives (*partitive relation* henceforth) is provided by the interpretation of the noun $\emptyset_{[+part]}$.⁶ The latter is interpreted as an entity of type $\langle e, \langle e, t \rangle \rangle$ that applies to the denotation of a definite NP and determines the set of individuals that are part of the individual denoted by the definite NP.⁷

Incorporation of the definite determiner into (the preposition and) the relational noun corresponds to the semantic composition of the partitive relation and the meaning of the definite determiner:

- (6) a. $[[\emptyset_{[+part]}] \circ [the]] = \lambda y \lambda x [x \leq y] \circ \lambda P [\iota.P] = \lambda P \lambda x [x \leq \iota.P]$
 b. $[[\emptyset_{[+part]}] \circ [the](\text{folletti}')] = \lambda x [x \leq \iota.\text{folletti}']$
 c. $[[_{D} \text{dei}]] = \text{TypeShift} \circ [[\emptyset_{[+part]}] \circ [the]]$
 $= \lambda P \lambda Q \exists x [P(x) \wedge Q(x)] \circ \lambda y \lambda x [x \leq y] \circ \lambda P [\iota.P]$
 $= \lambda P \lambda Q \exists x [x \leq \iota.P \wedge Q(x)]$
 d. $[[_{DF} \text{dei folletti}]] = \lambda Q \exists x [x \leq \iota.\text{folletti}' \wedge Q(x)]$

⁶ Implicitly I have been and I will continue to assume in my discussion in the text that the partitive relation in a partitive construction is contributed by the preposition *di*. For present purposes it is only relevant that something in the structure of partitives provides the partitive relation, be it a null relational noun or the partitive preposition. In either case it is expected that such a relation is present in the semantics of BPs as well, if they are true partitives.

⁷ Chierchia assumes that the relational noun $\emptyset_{[+part]}$ imposes the restriction that its complement is a definite NP. This restriction accounts for the so-called *Partitive Constraint* (Ladusaw 1982).

In addition, the following step (raising of the N-P-D complex to the higher D position) involves type shifting of the meaning of the N-P-D complex via the operator \exists (defined as $\exists : \exists P = \lambda Q \exists x [P(x) \wedge Q(x)]$), which derives the meaning of *dei* used as a determiner given in (6c).⁸ This determiner applies to the meaning of the embedded NP (*folletti* in (5b)) to obtain a generalized quantifier.

3.3. Consequences

Chierchia's proposal accounts for the facts in (3) and (4). Italian BPs are existentially quantified NPs, so it is expected that they can interact scopally with other operators in the sentence. In particular they are not expected to behave like BNs, which denote kinds and receive an existential interpretation through the process of *Kind Derived Predication*.⁹ This takes care of (3).

Furthermore, the contribution of the semantics of the definite article to the interpretation of BPs explains the facts in (4): the meaning of the entity of type $\langle e, t \rangle$ in (6b) is essentially equivalent to the meaning of the noun *folletti* with the addition of the presupposition – introduced by the ι operator – that the denotation of this predicate is non-empty. BPs are thus presuppositional NPs, which explains the lack of an existential interpretation for the *there* sentence in (4b).

Summarizing, the analysis proposed by Chierchia (1998) maintains that Italian BPs are true partitive NPs: the partitive article *dei* is the morpho-syntactic composition of the partitive preposition and the definite article, and the interpretation of BPs is the semantic composition of (i) the existential quantifier introduced by the type-shifting operator \exists , (ii) the partitive relation and (iii) the definite article present in the (partitive) structure of these NPs.

4. Chierchia (1998) is not right

If Chierchia's arguments are correct Italian BPs are true partitives, and their morphological similarity to full partitives is not accidental: the Italian partitive determiner is the morpho-syntactic composition of the partitive preposition *di* and the definite article *i*.

In this section I argue that this conclusion is not correct. In particular, I show that two predictions of Chierchia's analysis – those in (ii) and (iii) above – are not supported empirically. The semantic properties of Italian BPs – despite the facts

⁸ The function in (6a) applied to an NP meaning derives an entity of type $\langle e, t \rangle$ (6b), which cannot constitute an argument. The type-shifted function in (6c), instead, derives an entity of type $\langle \langle e, t \rangle, t \rangle$, which is a possible argument. Out of the various shifting operators from predicative into argumental types only \exists can apply in Italian BPs; see Chierchia (1998) for discussion.

⁹ This is Chierchia's explanation for the scopelessness of BNs. An alternative is the proposal by van Geenhoven (1998) according to which BNs denote properties and receive an existential interpretation by combining with the verbal predicate via the process of *Semantic Incorporation*.

in (3) and (4) – do *not* support the conclusion that the partitive relation and the definite article are involved in the semantic composition of these NPs.

4.1. *Against partitivity*

Chierchia does not discuss explicitly one prediction of his analysis of Italian BPs. If Italian BPs are true partitives they should not only trigger the presupposition that the denotation of the embedded noun is not empty – a presupposition triggered by the definite article in (5b) – but they should have a *partitive* semantics. That is, they should display the semantic properties that in full partitives are associated with the interpretation of the partitive relation.

In his discussion of partitives Chierchia assumes that $\emptyset_{[+part]}$ contributes the relation \leq to the interpretation of the partitive construction. However it has been argued by Barker (1998) that the semantics of partitives involves the *proper part* relation $<$. This explains why partitives cannot be headed by a definite determiner unless they are modified by a relative clause (7) (a property that Barker calls *anti-uniqueness*).

- (7) a. *the two of John's friends
 b. the two of John's friends that you pointed out last night

The semantics of the relation $<$ accounts as well for the entailment, which partitives seem to convey, that the denotation of the embedded noun contains additional elements that are not in the denotation of the partitive NP itself (8a):

- (8) a. # *Alcuni dei marziani che sono atterrati nel mio giardino mi hanno detto che loro sono gli ultimi*
 [some of the Martians that have.3.PL landed in the my backyard]_i to me have.3.PL told that they_i are.3.PL the last *rappresentanti della loro specie.*
 representatives of the their species
- b. *Dei marziani che sono atterrati nel mio giardino*
 [of the Martians that have.3.PL landed in the my backyard]_i
mi hanno detto che loro sono gli ultimi
 to me have.3.PL told that they_i are.3.PL the last *rappresentanti della loro specie.*
 representatives of the their species
 “Some martians who landed in my backyard told me that they are the last representatives of their species.”

(8a) requires the speaker to attribute contradictory beliefs to the relevant group of Martians¹⁰ which makes the interpretation of the sentence rather marked (hence the diacritic). This is due to the entailment triggered by proper partitivity that the denotation of *marziani* contains other individuals in addition to those denoted by the whole partitive *alcuni dei marziani*.

On the other hand no similar semantic restriction holds for (8b): the speaker can truthfully utter this sentence without attributing contradictory beliefs to the relevant group of Martians. As (8b) shows, Italian BPs do not seem to be characterized by the semantics of proper partitivity.

Italian BPs, thus, do not display properties that characterize partitive NPs in general as a consequence of their partitive semantics. This is unexpected if they are a type of partitive and the semantic composition of the Italian partitive determiner involves the partitive relation $<$.

4.2. Against definiteness

Chierchia's analysis of Italian BPs accounts for the facts in (4) in terms of the existence presupposition triggered by the semantics of the definite article in the compositional derivation of the interpretation of the structure in (5b). However, this presupposition does not seem to be comparable to the existence presupposition that characterizes full partitive NPs; witness the contrast:

- (9) a. #*Mi piacerebbe trovare alcuni dei Dodo, ma*
to me would please.3.SG find.INF some of the Dodos, but
so che oramai sono estinti.
know.1.SG that nowadays are.3.PL extinct
- b. *Mi piacerebbe trovare dei Dodo, ma so*
to me would please.3.SG find.INF of the Dodos, but know.1.SG
che oramai sono estinti.
that nowadays are.3.PL extinct
‘‘I would like to find some Dodos, but I know that they are extinct nowadays.’’

The existence presupposition triggered by Italian BPs – if present at all – is more easily defeasible than the existence presupposition in parallel full partitives.

¹⁰ Or to attribute factually incorrect beliefs to them, if the speaker trusts the relevant individuals to be speaking truthfully. The precise characterization of the semantic effect in (8a) is irrelevant for the purpose of the argument in the text. Whatever the nature of this effect, it is clear that a similar effect does not obtain in the case of (8b). Notice that (8a) has an (irrelevant) interpretation under which this semantic effect does not arise: this is the interpretation according to which the pronoun *loro* refers to the set of individuals denoted by the embedded NP *i marziani* rather than to the denotation of the whole partitive NP *alcuni dei marziani*.

This is unexpected if both types of presuppositions have the same source in the definite determiner embedded in the partitive structure as proposed by Chierchia.

4.3. *What about (4)?*

Summarizing, neither the prediction that Italian BPs involve the semantics of the partitive relation, nor the prediction that they involve the semantics of the definite article seem to survive a closer scrutiny of the interpretive properties of Italian BPs. The data in (8)–(9) are problematic insofar as the semantics of BPs is derived compositionally from a partitive structure like (5b). They thus argue against the analysis proposed by Chierchia (1998).

An alternative analysis according to which the partitive determiner is a lexical plural indefinite determiner does not lead to the expectation that Italian BPs are characterized by the semantics of proper partitivity or by the existence presupposition triggered by the definite determiner. But we saw above that the presuppositional nature of Italian BPs was crucial within Chierchia's analysis to deal with the data in (4). This explanation is lost under the alternative analysis that rejects the structure in (5b) for Italian BPs.

In my opinion this does not constitute a shortcoming: Chierchia's account for the facts in (4) cannot be correct in the first place. That the lack of an existential interpretation for the sentence in (4b) cannot be due to the presuppositional nature of the BP *dei folletti* is indeed argued by the fact that the same BP is compatible with an existential interpretation of the *there* sentence in (10):

- (10) *So che ci sono dei folletti, e prima o poi*
 know.1.SG that there are.3.PL of the elves, and sooner or later
ne troveró uno.
 of them will find.1.SG one
 "I know that there are some elves, and sooner or later I will manage to find one."

The availability of an existential interpretation in (10) is unexpected if *dei folletti* is a presuppositional NP. Some other semantic property of the sentence in (4b) must then be held responsible for the lack of an existential interpretation. The *there* sentence in (10) differs from the sentence in (4) only with respect to its polarity: the latter sentence constitutes a negative statement whereas the former is a positive statement. This suggests the hypothesis that the unavailability of an existential interpretation for (4b) is due to the negative polarity of this sentence.

Indeed, it seems to be a general fact about Italian that overt indefinites license an existential interpretation in negative *there* sentences only when their determiner/numeral is accented/marked as focus. The sentences in (11) uttered

with normal intonation in a neutral context are quite odd, but become perfect if a contrast-set for the determiner/numeral is made salient in the context and/or by the prosodic accent pattern:¹¹

- (11) a. *Non c' è ??(neanche) un folletto.*
 not there is ??(even) one elf
 "There isn't (even) one elf."
 b. *Non ci sono DUE/TRE/POCHI/MOLTI folletti.*
 not there are.3.PL two/three/few/many elves
 "There aren't TWO/THREE/FEW/MANY elves."

An independent piece of data that becomes relevant in this connection is the following observation: the Italian partitive determiner *dei* seems to resist focusing. As far as I can see this property of the partitive determiner can be related to the nature of the possible contrast-set for *dei*: *dei folletti*, intuitively, can refer to a set of elves of any cardinality greater than 1, thus the contrast-set for *dei* is given by cardinalities between 0 and 1. Somehow sets having one of these cardinalities seem to be hard to construct for the speaker:¹² if the context does not provide explicitly 0 or 1 as cardinality with which the denotation of *dei* should be contrasted, it is hard for the speaker to construct a contrast-set that would license focusing of the determiner (Schwarzschild 1993).

That something along these lines might explain the data in (4b) is argued by the observation that when appropriate contrast sets for *dei* are provided explicitly Italian BPs license existential interpretation in negative *there* sentences as well:

- (12) a. *Non ci sono DEI folletti, ce n' è soltanto uno.*
 not there are.3.PL of the elves, there of them is only one
 "There aren't SOME elves, there is only one."
 b. [?]*Non ci sono DEI folletti, infatti non ce n' è neanche uno.*
 not there are.3.PL of the elves, indeed not there of them is
 even one
 "There aren't SOME elves, indeed there isn't even one."

This provides further support for the claim that the facts in (4) should not lead to the conclusion that Italian BPs are presuppositional. The unavailability of the

¹¹ The examples in (11) should be read as follows: the sentences license an existential interpretation but become bad – under the same reading – if the pitch accent does not fall on the determiner/numeral or if the focus operator *neanche* is left out.

¹² Possibly because they constitute degenerate pluralities.

existential interpretation for (4b) can be accounted for in terms of the interaction of general properties of indefinites in negative *there* sentences and specific properties of the Italian partitive determiner. And, as shown by (10) and (12), Italian BPs *are* compatible with an existential interpretation of *there* sentences, which – if the analysis proposed by Zucchi (1993) is correct – indicates that they are not necessarily presuppositional.

5. *What is the structure of Italian BPs?*

Chierchia's conclusion that Italian BPs are true partitives seems to be too hasty. Italian BPs do *not* display properties that are known to hold of full partitives in general, and in particular they do not seem to display the semantic restrictions that one would expect to associate with the semantics of the partitive relation and with the semantics of the definite article.

But these facts do not force the conclusion that Italian BPs *cannot* have a partitive structure: the data in (9)–(12) are problematic only for an analysis that, like Chierchia's, claims that Italian BPs are *unambiguously* partitive NPs.

5.1. *The first alternative: a syntactic ambiguity*

Under the assumption that Italian BPs are structurally ambiguous one can account both for the data discussed by Chierchia as evidence in favor of his proposal and for the data presented in the previous section. Presuppositional interpretations would arise from the possibility for Italian BPs to be assigned a partitive structure à la Chierchia by the syntactic parser. Instead weak indefinite interpretations would arise from – for example – their being assigned a structure like the one proposed for French BPs by Delfitto (1993) or Roy (2001).

This analysis would be able to maintain the conclusion that – at least under one of the two structures that can be assigned to Italian BPs – the morphological similarity between BPs and full partitives is expected.

5.2. *The second alternative: no ambiguity*

Alternatively, one could suggest that Italian BPs are not ambiguous and are never analyzed as having a partitive structure. The partitive determiner is a lexical plural indefinite determiner and Italian BPs do not differ from other non-partitive indefinite NPs like *due/alcuni folletti* 'two/some elves': they can enter scope relations with other operators but are not necessarily presuppositional.

This second analysis would be preferable on theoretical grounds in that it does not need to postulate a syntactic ambiguity to account for the interpretive properties of Italian BPs. On the other hand this analysis could not maintain even the weaker account for the morphological similarity between BPs and full

partitives in Italian that is available to the proponents of the first analysis.

5.3. *Data from the interpretation of possessives*

But are there *empirical* data that can distinguish between the two alternatives? I think that there are: data from the interpretation of possessive NPs seem to support the second analysis over the first one.

It is a well-known fact that the interpretation of possessive NPs can be context-dependent. E.g. *John's dogs* in (13) can be interpreted as denoting the set of dogs that attacked John, rather than the set of dogs belonging to him.

- (13) Yesterday John and Paul were attacked by groups of dogs. Unfortunately John's dogs were not captured.

But *free interpretations* like the one exemplified in (13) are not available for all types of possessive NPs (Storto 2000). In particular, the availability of free interpretations seems to correlate with the presence of the definite article, as the following Italian paradigm illustrates:¹³

- (14) *Ieri Gianni e Paolo sono stati attaccati da gruppi di cani;*
 yesterday Gianni and Paolo were attacked by groups of dogs
- a. *sfortunatamente i cani di Gianni non sono stati catturati.*
 unfortunately the dogs of Gianni not have been captured
- b. *(s)fortunatamente ognuno/uno/alcuni/molti/due dei cani di Gianni non è/sono stati catturato/i.*
 (un)fortunately each one/one/some/many/two of the dogs of Gianni not has/have been captured
- c. *#(s)fortunatamente ogni/un/alcuni/molti/due cane/i di Gianni non è/sono stati catturato/i.*
 has/have been captured

Free interpretations are available for definite (14a) and partitive (14b) possessive NPs, but they are not for (non-partitive) indefinite or quantificational possessives (14c). Now, if Italian BPs can be assigned a partitive structure as suggested by the first analysis sketched above it is expected that Italian possessive BPs should license free interpretations. But, as (15) points out, this is not the case: Italian possessive BPs do *not* license free interpretations.

¹³ The possessive NPs in (14c) cannot be construed as denoting part of the set of dogs introduced in the context-setting sentence. This explains the degraded status of (14c) as a follow-up to the first sentence. See Storto (2003) for an analysis of these facts.

- (15) *Ieri Gianni e Paolo sono stati attaccati da gruppi di cani;*
 yesterday Gianni and Paolo were attacked by groups of dogs;
 #*sfortunatamente dei cani di Gianni non sono stati catturati.*
 #unfortunately of the dogs of Gianni not have been captured

The unavailability of free interpretations for Italian possessive BPs is unexpected under the hypothesis that Italian BPs can be ambiguously analyzed as partitives and as weak indefinites. Thus (15) argues in favor of the alternative analysis: Italian BPs are not ambiguous, and should be analyzed in parallel with other overt non-partitive indefinite NPs. Like other non-partitive indefinites possessive BPs do not license free interpretations.

6. Conclusions

Summarizing, I have suggested that – contra the conclusions drawn by Chierchia (1998) on the basis of (3) and (4) – the postulation of a partitive structure is not necessary to account for the semantic properties of Italian BPs.

In addition, I have illustrated cases in which Italian BPs do not show semantic properties that one would expect to correlate with a structure like the one suggested by Chierchia. Even if one wants to maintain that the structure proposed by Chierchia constitutes a possible structural analysis for Italian BPs, a second non-partitive structure is needed to account for those cases in which Italian BPs do not trigger partitivity entailments and/or existence presuppositions.

Finally, with the data from possessive BPs I have argued that Italian BPs *cannot* have a partitive structure at all: their morphological similarity with full partitives does not indicate a structural similarity between the two types of NPs. This leads to the conclusion that the interpretive properties of Italian BPs are better accounted for under the assumption that they are overt non-partitive indefinites, where *dei* is a lexical indefinite plural determiner, rather than the morpho-syntactic composition of the partitive preposition and the definite article.

7. Afterthoughts (inspired by Zamparelli 2002b)

One analytic option that I have not considered explicitly is discussed by Zamparelli (2002b). The hypothesis that Italian BPs have an underlying partitive structure can be maintained by arguing that the partitive semantics determined by this underlying structure does not apply to an ordinary definite nominal, but to a *kind-denoting* definite nominal like the one in (16), which would be rendered in English by a bare plural NP (see Zamparelli 2002a):¹⁴

¹⁴ This analytic option has been suggested to me independently by Dominique Sportiche (p.c.).

- (16) *I dodo si sono estinti molti anni fa.*
 the dodos SELF are extinct many years ago
 “Dodos have become extinct many years ago.”

The existence of this alternative analytic possibility brings into question the strength of the conclusions that I draw above: this alternative analysis does not fall prey to one set of arguments that I raised against Chierchia’s proposal.

The arguments in (9) are not arguments against a partitive structure *tout-court* but arguments against a partitive structure *built on ordinary definite NPs*, i.e. nominals that carry existence presuppositions. Kind-denoting definites do not carry existence presuppositions, a property that within Zamparelli’s proposal immediately accounts for the differences between full partitives and BPs in (9).

Still, accounting for the facts in (8) within this alternative analysis is not as straightforward: it is necessary to explain how the proper partitivity requirement applies to a kind (the denotation of the definite NP that BPs are built on). I refer the reader to Zamparelli (2002b, §5) for an explicit attempt at doing so.

Even leaving aside the task of deciding between the analysis of Italian BPs sketched in this paper and the analysis proposed by Zamparelli, I take the main (negative) conclusions of this paper to be correct: Italian BPs are different from full partitive NPs.¹⁵ Under either alternative analysis, the data in (14)–(15) argue that BPs are not ambiguous: a structure isomorphic to that of full partitives is not available to these NPs.¹⁶ Thus, the postulation of such a structure is neither needed nor desired in order to account for the semantic properties of Italian BPs.

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¹⁵ Zamparelli (2002b, §3) proposes interesting syntactic and semantic arguments in favor of an analysis according to which the partitive determiner is derived in the syntax, rather than being a lexical plural indefinite determiner. For reasons of space I cannot address those arguments here.

¹⁶ Within an analysis à la Zamparelli the data in (15) are not unexpected if the availability of free interpretations for possessives depends on the presuppositions triggered by (ordinary) definite NPs. See Storto (2003) for discussion.

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