

Indefiniteness and Specificity in Old Italian Texts*

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0. Introduction: Indefiniteness and grammaticalization of determiners: the corpus

Object of this study is the marking of nominal indefiniteness in Old Italian, more precisely Old Tuscan texts, in three collections of novellas.

In this period of early Romance literacy, nominal Phrases¹ can appear as bare singulars or bare plurals, but also with one or more functional elements preceding the noun. The elements discussed here will be these semantically indefinite² determiners that can appear alone with a bare noun in a NP ($_N$), excluding hereby indefinite elements which are only able to appear in the second (or later) position of a NP (Det_N), like *certo* ('certain') in Modern Standard Italian (*un certo uomo*, **certo uomo*).

The choice of the three corpus texts has been guided by the relative homogeneity of text types, i.e. the thematic and formal continuity as testified in the anonymous *Novellino* (written by 1280-1300) and the ever since canonical *Decameròn* by Giovanni

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¹ We will not discuss here the status of the examined determiners as the head of a maximal projection, i.e. the DP-hypothesis according to Abney 1987, or the existence of a functional projection inside the DP, namely QP, cf. Löbel, E. (1989): Q as a functional category. In: Bhatt, Chr. (ed.): *Syntactic Phrase Structure Phenomena in Noun Phrases and Sentences*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 133-157. For the sake of simplicity, we will call every expression containing a noun or a pronoun a NP. We will furthermore not discuss whether the indefinite elements preceding a noun are part of the same or different syntactic categories, cf. Vater 1982 or Krifka 1989. It is highly probable that we have to distinguish elements able to be postponed or to appear separate from the noun in certain partitive constructions ("quantifier floating", for example *alcuno*) from elements whose position is relatively fixed (for example *uno*; *certo* is certainly on its way to an adjective-like element, being already able to cooccur with *uno* in our texts, though still actualizing nouns also alone. All the other elements cannot cooccur). To be able to compare their textual distribution, we only analyze the actual prenominal realizations of these elements, regardless of the fact that they can probably also appear in other positions.

² Semantic indefiniteness is to be understood in the Heimian sense as 'novelty of discourse referents' at the semantic level of 'file cards', irrespective of the actual reference of certain NPs in the text. The most important interpretation rule in 'file-change semantics' is the "Extended–Novelty–Familiarity–Condition":

"For p to be felicitous w.r.t. F it is required for every NP_i in p that

(i) if NP_i is [-definite], then $i \notin \text{Dom}(F)$;

(ii) if NP_i is [+definite], then

a) $i \in \text{Dom}(F)$, and

b) if NP_i is a formula, F entails NP_i."

(Heim 1988:369f.). In short: [+definite] means 'familiar with respect to the file', [-definite] 'novel with respect to the file'.

Boccaccio (the major part of the novella is written in the second half of the 14th century) and, finally, the slightly epigonic *Novellino* by Masuccio Salernitano (written from 1450 to 1475/76).

The anonymous *Novellino* is one of the earliest Italo-Romance narrative texts. The late 13th century marks the relatively late beginning (in the context of Romance languages) of the Italo-Romance writing tradition and therefore represents an important turning point in the emancipation of Romance languages from Latin domination. Boccaccio's *Decameròn* has served as a model for prose literature for centuries, in particular since Pietro Bembo in his influential *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525) established him, together with Petrarca for poetry, as the summit of artistic linguistic perfection in literature and marks the language variety used by Boccaccio as the obligatory variety to choose for any work of high literature in the Italo-Romance world. Even before this, Masuccio had imitated content and style of Boccaccio, although his southern Italian origins (Salerno) and a certain portion of narrative originality allow to consider his *Novellino* an independent work of Italian narrative.

In view of the fact that the overwhelming part of written texts in the centuries central to our study, i.e. the late 13th, the 14th and the 15th century, is in Latin, a language without any nominal determiners, and that Modern Italian like every Modern Romance language has definite and indefinite articles and a great variety of indefinite quantifiers and pronouns³, the main question of this discussion will be: What is the textual function of indefinite determiners in these early texts? Where do they appear at the beginning of their “grammaticalization path”⁴ to obligatory articles? What are the relevant semantic properties of nominal indefinite elements that determine their further development into articles, positive and negative quantifiers or “negative polarity items”⁵? How can modern dynamic model-theoretic semantics like DRT or “file change semantics”⁶ deal with these properties and the diachronic facts, in view of the fact that the basic unit of meaning in these models is not the sentence but the (entire) discourse – the central entity when it comes to the grammaticalization of determiners (see below)? This becomes even more problematic as the semantic models in question work with a basically dichotomic conception of the semantic potential of determiners⁷ and consider also bare NPs (at least those containing a count noun) simply as indefinite.

1. Emergence and Function of Nominal Determiners in Germanic and Romance Languages

In a recent study on the development of Germanic article systems, Elisabeth Leiss (2000) considers both articles and verbal aspect markers as ‘grammatical synonyms’ in that they indicate ‘boundedness’ of objects and events, which become thereby ‘percepts’, ‘tokens’, whereas bare noun phrases or non-finite verbs tend to indicate mere concepts, ‘types’⁸. The common function of aspect systems and articles is, according to

³ Cf. Longobardi ³1991, Renzi ³1991.

⁴ Cf. Hopper/Traugott 1993 und Heine/Claudi/Hünemeyer 1991.

⁵ Cf. Hoeksema 1983, Ladusaw 1993, Ramat 1997 for Italian *veruno*.

⁶ Cf. Heim 1988, Kamp & Reyle 1993.

⁷ Cf. for example the “Extended–Novelty–Familiarity–Condition” of Heim 1988 cited above.

⁸ Cf. the early sketch of the principal article functions in Coseriu 1955.

Leiss, the indication of referentiality⁹, i.e. they indicate the reference of the internal verb-argument. Languages with the aspectual opposition ‘perfective’ – ‘imperfective’ can do without articles, because the mere value of ‘perfective’ action or event allows to conclude to the existence of a specific, determined object involved in this action or event (cf. approximately in the English example *Peter has eaten an apple.*), while ‘imperfective’ aspect favors the ‘concept-status’ of the intended referent (generic or non-specific: *Peter used to eat an apple every day in his youth*). Loss of aspectual marking is, according to Leiss, often accompanied by the gradual obligatorification¹⁰ of nominal determiners, which in the beginning cooccur preferably with count nouns in the focus of information, marking their important and new referential status as percepts (in so-called ‘hypodetermining languages’). Later, (definite) articles turn to mark anaphorically known referents, i.e. given information in the background of the textual information structure (‘hyperdetermining languages’). Only with real ‘percepts’, identifiability becomes an important property of the intended referents. In this scenario, we can notice a strong correlation between (in-)definiteness and information structure, in that nominal determiners first mark foregrounded information and in a second step acquire the textual value of ‘given’ – vs. ‘new’ information (definite vs. indefinite in a textual approach to (in-)definiteness like the one in Heim 1988, for example). Leiss is able to show this correlation for Gothic and Old High German, but its adequacy for Romance languages, all of which preserve an aspectual differentiation at least in the past tenses (simple past as perfective and ‘aorist’, imperfect tense as imperfective or iterative/edurative/habitual) remains to be shown.

The beginning of a systematic use of nominal determiners in late Latin texts is analyzed in detail in the seminal work by Selig 1992. Latin demonstratives, *ipse* and later almost exclusively *ille*, occur first with non-continuous discourse referents of considerable importance (protagonists, important details like objects, times, places), so that we can in a first step see a certain correspondence between the findings of Leiss and Selig: nominal determiners seem to systematically mark foregrounded information, often with postverbal internal arguments, before they spread to continuous discourse referents, changing their textual potential. Selig points out, however, that on the way to systematic grammaticalization of definite determiners as anaphoric devices and – always later and neither functionally nor distributionally symmetrical to them¹¹ – indefinite determiners as cataphoric, referent-introducing signals, we have to accept an intermediate period of systematic marking of each important, individualized discourse referent, i.e. of marking of specific and highly “persistent”¹² textual elements¹³. In this period, non-specific and generic reference may still remain unmarked, a characteristic of Leiss’ ‘hypodetermining languages’. From this intermediate period to the obligatory marking of each continuous discourse referent (at least in argument position¹⁴) by the

⁹ Cf. the main idea of von Heusinger 1997: the epsilon-operator as the common semantic element of definite and indefinite article serves to determine a ‘representative’ of a set, to form a term out of a non-fixed element of a set.

¹⁰ One characteristics of grammaticalization processes, cf. Lehmann 1985.

¹¹ Cf. Christophersen 1939, Coseriu 1955, Moravcsik 1969, Hawkins 1978, Chesterman 1991 etc.

¹² Cf. Givón, T. (1983): Topic Continuity in Discourse: An Introduction. In: Givón, T. (ed.): *Topic Continuity in Discourse: A Quantitative Cross Language Study*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia, 1-41.

¹³ Stage II in Greenbergs 1978 scheme of different stages in definiteness marking and article grammaticalization.

¹⁴ For a typological language classification according to the possibility of admitting bare noun phrases in argument position cf. Chierchia 1998.

definite and, also, of each new (singular) discourse referent by the indefinite article, the earlier apparently fundamental distinction between specific and non-specific reference seems to get lost.

2. Specificity and textual information structure

The notion of specificity is fundamental to the following speaker-oriented distinction: “An indefinite [¹⁵] singular noun phrase may be used to denote a particular entity, or to speak of any arbitrary member of the class described by the noun phrase.”¹⁶ In the former case, the respective noun phrase can be interpreted specifically, whereas in the latter, it is to be interpreted non-specifically.

Regardless of the debate whether definite and/or indefinite descriptions involve reference or not, and whether reference is better to be described as a semantic or purely pragmatic phenomenon, recent accounts, both theoretical and empirical, show the relevance of specificity at a discourse pragmatic level: in modern languages possessing definite and indefinite articles¹⁷, the early stages of determiner grammaticalization systematically demonstrate a high preference to mark specific, i.e. particular important discourse elements in texts¹⁸. Speakers and writers highlight specific referents, first by certain indefinite elements, later in the text by definite determiners, searching to lend a certain profile (‘foreground vs. background of the story’) to their texts. Recent semantic accounts of specificity have attempted to explain the often mentioned existential presupposition of specific indefinites by ‘(textual) givenness’ in a broad sense as the central semantic element of specific noun phrases and thereby a certain affinity of specific and definite noun phrases¹⁹. As there are special contexts which provoke a specific and others which provoke a non-specific interpretation of indefinite noun phrases²⁰ (sometimes there are also pragmatic reasons excluding one or the other interpretation), Haspelmath 1997 analyzes the occurrences of different series of indefinite pronouns in contexts which favor specific interpretation (concerning especially arguments of predicates aspectually marked as perfective) and in contexts which favor non-specific interpretation (especially “negative polarity contexts” like questions, the protasis in conditionals, scope of negation, “irrealis” contexts like imperatives, futures etc)²¹.

¹⁵ Specificity-distinctions exist also for definite noun phrases, see for further discussion Lyons 1999, 165-178.

¹⁶ Lyons 1999, 165.

¹⁷ See also Lyons 1999, 177f., who mentions a great variety of languages (for example of the Austronesian family) indicating both specificity and definiteness (i.e. their common feature of ‘familiarity’ to the speaker) by only one article.

¹⁸ Cf. the results in Skrélina /Čebelis 1972, Blazer 1979, Givón 1981, Heinz 1982, Selig 1992, Elvira 1994, Rosén 1994.

¹⁹ Cf. the short discussion of specificity in Heim 1988, 220-226; see further Enç 1991, who shows a partitive “inclusion-relation” between specific referents and a prementioned group (“weak antecedents”, cf. Enç 1991, 7ff.), Delfitto/Corver 1998 who attribute a “familiarity presupposition” to specific referents which causes certain syntactic phenomena, Van Geenhoven 1998 etc.

²⁰ Cf. for example Heim 1988, 220ff., following Fodor/Sag 1982.

²¹ Note that Eva Lavric, following Kleiber, shows in her publications the necessity to differentiate between ‘hypothetic’ (like the scope of negation, arguments of world-creating predicates etc) vs. ‘factive contexts’ and the opposition of ‘referent known’ vs. ‘referent unknown’ to the speaker, which

To sum up: Besides the obvious correlation between (in-)definiteness and information structure accounted for in each textual concept of (in-)definiteness as, roughly speaking, ‘given’ vs. ‘new information’ (the basic distinction also in DRT and “file-change semantics”, see above), the speaker-oriented category of specificity is also to be considered whenever one analyzes information packaging in texts. Particularly in the early stages of grammaticalization like the one discussed here with Old Italian texts, specificity seems to be a decisive factor which provokes the marking of noun phrases by determiners in general and it seems to be a feature that can be explicitly marked by lexical differentiation in the paradigm of indefinite elements (cf. Haspelmath 1997, Lyons 1999, 174ff.). The guiding question of the following account will be if a simple dichotomy ‘definite’ vs. ‘indefinite’ in the sense ‘given’ vs. ‘new information’ (or “file card”, for example) is sufficient to understand the functioning of the most frequent indefinite determiners in the texts, and also if the category of “introducing discourse referents” is adequate at all, at least at a discourse-pragmatic level, to describe certain indefinites or if it could not be precisely the signaling of ‘non-introduction’ that is the textual contribution of some of the analyzed indefinites. Interestingly enough, Hans Kamp (this volume) discusses precisely this problem in his proposal of a “use-oriented approach to specificity and related notions”, when he asks, from the speaker’s point of view, “what indefinite NP to choose” (6), if the hearer of a discourse element does not have “a representation in his entity library for the entity [...] which the speaker [...] represents” (4) by a noun phrase. Kamp mentions some contexts (for example trans-sentential anaphora to an indefinite) which incite a non-existential interpretation, and asks whether it could be “*part of the semantics* of such discourses that the indefinite gets a non-existential interpretation” (8f.). In this case, we could probably go a step further in investigating indefinite elements and show that sometimes not only their context elements, but their lexical semantics itself incites specific or non-specific interpretation.

The above mentioned correlations of (in-)definiteness and information structure lead to a detailed analysis of the following distributional characteristics of indefinite determiners: If nominal determination serves to highlight ‘rhematic’, foregrounded discourse referents in ‘hypodetermining languages’ and to mark the ‘given’ vs. ‘new’ status of the respective discourse referents in ‘hyperdetermining languages’ (Leiss 2000), we have to examine the sentential distribution of the occurrences of indefinites, i.e. their occurrences in pre- or postverbal position (in the main syntactic functions subject and object) and their occurrences in main vs. subordinate clauses with finite or non-finite verbs, together with their cooccurrences with perfective vs. imperfective aspect (in the Romance languages in the past: *passato remoto* vs. *imperfetto*). If specificity is furthermore the main feature admitting anaphoric reference to the new referent introduced by the indefinite noun phrase in question²², and if it is in general the main motivation to mark a discourse referent (see above, especially Selig 1992), we have to discuss the cataphoric potential of the indefinite noun phrases and their ability to introduce a central discourse referent. Finally, we will search for a pattern of lexical differentiation inside the group of the discussed indefinite determiners according to

are both understood as revealing the opposition of ‘specific’ vs. ‘non-specific’. Haspelmath provides linguistic evidence for this distinction by showing that some languages have a different series of indefinite pronouns for specific indefinites denoting referents known and those unknown to the speaker, for example in Russian, cf. Haspelmath 1997, 45-48.

²² Cf. Karttunen 1976.

specificity vs. non-specificity and will therefore study the distribution of indefinite NPs in highly ‘specific’ vs. ‘non-specific’ contexts according to Haspelmath 1997.

3. Properties of indefinites in Old Italian

To understand the lexical differentiation in Old Italian indefinite determiners, we have to shed a light on Modern Standard Italian, a clearly ‘hyperdetermining language’ (Leiss 2000). In Modern Italian, there is a textual opposition of definite (neutrally marked by the definite article *il* and its allomorphs) and indefinite noun phrases, the former being either marked by the indefinite article derived from the numeral *uno*²³ for singular count nouns in argument position, a partitive article (*del*)²⁴ for singular mass nouns in certain syntactic positions, especially in preverbal subject and in object position, and with zero or a plural partitive (*dei*) or *alcuni* (‘some’) or *certi* (‘certain’) with plural count nouns. Zero is in these cases always interpreted non-specifically and extremely restricted in preverbal position²⁵.

We will in the following concentrate on the correspondences or differences between the major indefinite nominal markers in Old and Modern Standard Italian, i.e. the distribution of *uno*, *alcuno*²⁶ (in Modern Italian only under scope of negation in the singular meaning ‘nobody’, with specific indefinite interpretation ‘some’ only in the plural), *certo* (‘a certain’), being an often mentioned indicator of specific interpretation and occurring (interestingly enough) also alone as a nominal determiner in Old Italian, and zero, since bare noun phrases are usually interpreted as indefinite in the above mentioned semantic theories (DRT, FCS). We have analyzed up to 200 occurrences of each of the three indefinite determiners and will discuss only the singular occurrences here, and, additionally, by a random selection of 100 occurrences of bare singular noun phrases.

Before we will have a closer look at the correlations between distributional properties of *uno*, *alcuno*, *certo* and zero and textual information structure, the

²³ Cf. Givón 1978 and Renzi 1976.

²⁴ Probably inherited of Gallo-Romance languages and appearing relatively late, so that it has not been considered in this study.

²⁵ For details see Renzi ³1991. Besides this general sketch of indefinite descriptions, Modern Italian possesses a great variety of quantifiers and indefinite pronouns, which form, according to Haspelmath 1997, three major groups: *qualche* (‘some’ or ‘any’) for specific and to a large extent non-specific uses (occurring in contexts of specificity and in irrealis contexts, in questions, conditionals, under indirect negation, i.e. in complement sentences of negated matrix predicates, and direct negation), *nessuno* (‘nobody’) for negative contexts and questions, and a series of *-unque* (*chiunque*, *qualunque*, engl.: ‘whoever’, ‘whatever’ and so on) in comparatives and free-choice contexts. We will not discuss here the distribution of pronominal indefinites and further quantifiers.

²⁶ The most frequent occurring indefinite determiner and pronoun in Old Italian texts after *uno*:

	Il Novellino (<i>anonymous</i>) (27029 words, 4599 different <i>Lemmata</i> (?))	Decameròn (<i>Boccaccio</i>) (269588 words, 17646 different <i>Lemmata</i> (?))	Il Novellino (<i>Masuccio</i>) (135102 words, 14100 different <i>Lemmata</i> (?))
<i>uno det</i>	193 (out of 200 analyzed occurrences of totally 538)	187 (out of 200 analyzed occurrences of totally 3116)	197 (out of 200 analyzed occurrences of totally 1388)
<i>alcuno det</i>	8 (out of totally 10 occurrences)	153 (out of 200 analyzed occurrences of totally 1114)	156 (out of 200 analyzed occurrences of totally 439)

etymology of *uno* and *alcuno* has to be summarized. Classical Latin had a rather clear-cut distribution of indefinite nominal markers²⁷, in that *quidam* (not continued in the Romance languages) was predominantly used with indefinite NPs with specific interpretation, especially in subject position, while *aliquis*, the first part of the compositional and nowadays negative *alc-uno*, accompanied non-specifically interpreted indefinite noun phrases, and *uno* was neutral in this regard.

3.1. Distribution of indefinite determiners in the sentence

Discussing only the two major argumental positions in the sentence, i.e. subject and object position, and more precisely the occurrences of indefinites in preverbal position and special topicalization structures like left dislocations or hanging topics²⁸, we can observe a rather clear distribution of the two syntactic functions:

all texts	<i>uno</i>		<i>alcuno</i>		<i>certo</i>		zero	
subject	118	20,45%	32	11,64%	3	12,50%	11	3,67%
preverb.	162	28,08%	123	44,73%	8	33,33%	111	37,00%
prevSub	41	34,75%	14	43,75%	1	33,33%	3	27,27%
object	166	28,77%	110	40,00%	6	25,00%	55	18,33%
prevObj.	14	8,43%	28	25,45%	0	0,00%	14	25,45%
Topic.	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%

Table 1

The two lines in bold in table 1 show the percentage of preverbal subjects and objects of all preverbal occurrences with indefinite determiners. Up to a half of all preverbal occurrences of *uno*, *alcuno* and *certo* (34,75%; 43,75%; 33,33%) are subjects, while only 8,43% of preverbal *uno*, 25,45% of preverbal *alcuno* and 0,00% of preverbal *certo* are objects. Only zero shows almost no difference between subjects and objects occurring preverbally, being much more freely admitted in these positions with non-specific or generic referents. Interestingly, zero is already quite rare with subjects in general (3,67% of the totally 300 zero occurrences in all the three texts). None of the indefinites occurs in special topicalization structures.

These data suggests that we already deal with a 'hyperdetermining language' (Leiss 2000), since the great majority of indefinite subjects appears in preverbal position in our texts, and since a clear majority of indefinite objects appears in postverbal position, regardless of the informational status of 'new' of all the discourse referents concerned. Constituent order is thus no longer able to indicate information structure, indefinite determiners mark 'new' referents by their semantic potential.

3.2. Specificity as a feature of the singular determiners

3.2.1. Specificity and 'zero'

Concerning the textual information organization, Old Italian *uno* already seems to be especially used for the introduction of specific and important discourse referents:

²⁷ Cf. Orlandini 1983, Mellet 1994.

²⁸ Cf., among others, Cinque 1977 and 1979, Lambrecht 1994.

all texts	uno		alcuno		certo		zero	
main cl.	353	61,18%	91	33,09%	12	50,00%	175	58,33%
finite	442	76,60%	159	57,82%	16	66,67%	211	70,33%
perf. asp.	245	42,46%	35	12,73%	10	41,67%	99	33,00%
cata.pot.	306	53,03%	30	10,91%	4	16,67%	76	25,33%
cent.ref.	146	25,30%	3	1,09%	1	4,17%	9	3,00%

Table 2

If we look only at the two last lines of table 2, more than half of the occurrences of *uno* introduce highly persistent referents, and about a quarter introduce protagonists, central objects, places and so on, whereas the other determiners are relatively rare in these functions. The only slight exception is represented by zero, which accompanies discourse referents with a certain cataphoric potential (25,33%) – a fact that is partly explained by its generic value:

	uno		alcuno		certo		zero	
Nov.	193		8		4		100	
gen.							39	39,00%
	uno		alcuno		certo		zero	
Dec.	187		139		10		100	
gen.							7	7,00%
	uno		alcuno		certo		zero	
Mas.	197		128		10		100	
gen.							3	3,00%

Table 3

Besides these clearly generic cases, there are many other occurrences of bare noun phrases which cannot be grouped without problems under the heading of ‘generic’, even sometimes not under ‘indefinite’:

- (1) *Marato standosi sopra la poppa e verso il mare riguardando, di niuna cosa da lor guardandosi, di concordia andarono e, lui prestamente di dietro preso, il gittarono in mare; e prima per ispazio di più d’ un miglio dilungati furono, che alcuno si fosse pure avveduto Marato esser caduto in mare.*

‘While Marato was standing at the stern and looking towards the sea, not bothering about them, they all went together towards him and, after quickly having seized him from behind, they threw him into the sea, and they were more than one mile away when somebody realized that Marato had fallen in the sea.’
(Boccaccio, *Decameron*: 127)

Mare in the prepositional phrase *in mare* refers not only to a uniquely identifiable discourse referent in this context, but also to an already mentioned, i.e. textually given one. It refers back to a definite noun phrase (*e verso il mare riguardando*) and forward to another bare noun phrase (*in mare*). Zero in locative PPs is a rather common feature of early stages of article grammaticalization and is still preserved in Modern Standard Italian, especially with the preposition²⁹ *in*. Contrary to the normally non-referential or better ‘non-actualized’³⁰ or generic use of noun phrases in Modern Standard Italian, our

²⁹ Cf. Renzi ³1991, 412. Renzi classifies these cases under ‘non-referential’, which becomes problematical in sentences with clear perfective aspect: *Poi andarono in teatro* (‘Then they went to the theatre’).

³⁰ Cf. Coseriu 1955.

texts show a rather systematic differentiation between PPs with important locations for the ongoing story (normally with indefinite or definite determiners) and peripheral ones³¹ like in example (1), where the fact of Marato's being thrown in the water is sufficient regardless of the identification of the concerned sea. This is an example of the difficulties in analyzing bare noun phrases simply as indefinite (or generic): it is neither the mere concept of 'seahood' nor a new discourse referent in the above passage, but an unimportant one.

3.2.2. *Certo* vs. *alcuno* – From non-specificity to negativity

Analyzing the presumed specificity of *certo* and the possible non-specificity of *alcuno*, given its etymology (see above), we can observe a gradual specialization of these two elements on 'specific' vs. 'non-specific contexts' from the 15th century (*Decameròn*) to the 16th century (*Novellino* of Masuccio):

	<i>uno</i>		<i>alcuno</i>		<i>certo</i>		zero	
Dec.	187		139		10		100	
main cl.	96	51,34%	58	41,73%	3	30,00%	58	58,00%
finite	128	68,45%	80	57,55%	4	40,00%	68	68,00%
perf. asp.	66	35,29%	28	20,14%	3	30,00%	33	33,00%
cata.pot.	105	56,15%	12	8,63%	3	30,00%	23	23,00%
cent.ref.	62	33,16%	2	1,44%	0	0,00%	1	1,00%

Table 4

	<i>uno</i>		<i>alcuno</i>		<i>certo</i>		zero	
Mas.	197		128		10		100	
main cl.	99	50,25%	29	22,66%	7	70,00%	48	48,00%
finite	135	68,53%	71	55,47%	8	80,00%	63	63,00%
perf. asp.	63	31,98%	7	5,47%	5	50,00%	27	27,00%
cata.pot.	99	50,25%	16	12,50%	1	10,00%	14	14,00%
cent.ref.	44	22,34%	1	0,78%	1	10,00%	1	1,00%

Table 5

In the *Decameròn* (table 4), *uno* and zero appear with more than half of their occurrences in main clauses, as arguments or adjuncts of finite verb phrases and slightly more often in the scope of a perfectly marked verb. *Alcuno* and *certo* (with very few occurrences in all the three texts, so that the statistics have mere indicative value), however, do not differ very much from this behavior, except perhaps in the interesting detail that *alcuno* cooccurs only in 20,14 % of its singular occurrences with perfective aspect.

While all indefinites analyzed still mainly occur with finite verbs, we find a clearer picture in Masuccio (table 5) when it comes to the distribution according to textual foregrounding. *Uno* and *certo* are now by far the most important referent-introducing devices in main clauses, while only a fifth of *alcuno*'s occurrences (22,66%) is found in these contexts. Together with the finding that perfective aspect in the past marks the main 'story line' in (Romance) narrative texts, *alcuno*'s 5,47% of occurrences with perfectly marked verbs indicate its specialization on background information.

³¹ Cf. Stark (in press).

If we have now a closer look at the ‘non-specific contexts’ (see above), we can observe a continuous loss of the initial non-hypothetical, but non-specific interpretations of *alcuno*³² and its drift towards negative contexts – modern *alcuno* in the singular almost exclusively occurs in the scope of sentential negation³³:

	<i>uno</i>		<i>alcuno</i>		<i>certo</i>		zero	
Nov.	193		8		4		100	
neg.	1	0,52%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
question	1	0,52%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%	2	2,00%
protasis	4	2,07%	2	25,00%	1	0,00%	3	3,00%
irr. con.	11	5,70%	2	25,00%	1	25,00%	6	6,00%
perf.	116	60,10%	0	0,00%	2	50,00%	40	40,00%

Table 6

	<i>uno</i>		<i>alcuno</i>		<i>certo</i>		zero	
Dec.	187		139		10		100	
neg.	4	2,14%	34	24,46%	0	0,00%	17	17,00%
question	2	1,07%	10	7,19%	0	0,00%	2	2,00%
protasis	3	1,60%	5	3,60%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
irr. con.	21	11,23%	28	20,14%	0	0,00%	12	12,00%
perf.	66	35,29%	27	19,42%	3	30,00%	33	33,00%

Table 7

	<i>uno</i>		<i>alcuno</i>		<i>certo</i>		zero	
Mas.	197		128		10		100	
neg.	4	2,03%	46	35,94%	0	0,00%	4	4,00%
question	0	0,00%	5	3,91%	0	0,00%	2	2,00%
protasis	1	0,51%	8	6,25%	0	0,00%	0	0,00%
irr. con.	31	15,74%	25	19,53%	1	10,00%	11	11,00%
perf.	63	31,98%	7	5,47%	5	50,00%	27	27,00%

Table 8

Considering only two criteria, cooccurrence with sentential negation on the one hand and perfective aspect on the other, we can see an important development from the almost archaic anonymous *Novellino* in the late 13th century (table 6) with generally very little lexical variation in the field of nominal indefiniteness and a systematic marking of highly important specific discourse referents by *uno* in the foreground of the single novellas, regardless of negation. Boccaccio’s *Decameròn* (table 7) shows one of the most varied paradigms of indefinite determiners (and pronouns) in our corpus. It demonstrates the obvious ‘specificity opposition’ of *uno* vs. *alcuno*, the former appearing rarely in negative or negative polarity contexts (and occurring with important discourse referents, as demonstrated above), the latter still appearing in foregrounded portions of the text (with perfective aspect), but occurring already more often particularly in negative contexts. The latest text, Masuccio’s *Novellino* (table 8), shows a strengthening of this development towards Modern Standard Italian, with more than a third of the *alcuno*-occurrences in negative contexts.

³² See above, footnote 21, for the distinction between hypothetical and non-specific, i.e. not known to the speaker.

³³ Cf. Ramat 1997 for the parallel, but earlier development of *veruno*.

3.2.3. Lexical differentiation

A synopsis of all the three texts shows that *uno* and *certo* are definitely the Old Italian determiners in the textual foreground (compare also the findings for textual persistency of discourse referents introduced by *uno* and *certo* in table 2), *uno* having almost lost the etymological potential of being neutral with respect to specificity oppositions:

all texts	<i>uno</i>		<i>alcuno</i>		<i>certo</i>		zero	
negation	9	1,56%	80	29,09%	0	0,00%	21	7,00%
question	3	0,52%	15	5,45%	0	0,00%	6	2,00%
protasis	8	1,39%	15	5,45%	1	4,17%	3	1,00%
irr. con.	63	10,92%	55	20,00%	2	8,33%	29	9,67%
perf.	245	42,46%	34	12,36%	10	41,67%	100	33,33%
gen.							49	16,33%

Table 9

For an impressive example of the almost complementary distribution of *uno* and *alcuno* with respect to ‘specificity’ contexts, see the following example:

- (2) *I due fratelli, come che molta speranza non prendessono di questo, nondimeno se n’ andarono a una religione di frati e domandarono alcuno santo e savio uomo che udisse la confessione d’ un lombardo che in casa loro era infermo; e fu lor dato un frate antico di santa e di buona vita e gran maestro in Iscrittura e molto venerabile uomo, nel quale tutti i cittadini grandissima e speciale divozione aveano, e lui menarono.*

‘The two brothers, although they did not have much hope from this, went to a monastery and asked for a holy and wise man who could hear the confession of a Lombardian who was in their house, sick, and they were given an old monk of holy and good life and a great master of the Holy Bible and a very venerable man, who was devotionally honored by all the citizens, and they took him with them.’

(Boccaccio, *Decameron*: 30)

The internal argument of the ‘world-creating predicate’ *domandare* (‘to ask for’) without existential presupposition is introduced by *alcuno*, indicating clearly the non-factual status of this discourse referent. Only when the semantics of the main predicate (*fu lor dato* – ‘they were given’) implies the existence of its internal argument (still postverbal in our example and with very similar lexical material) and when the noun phrase in question introduces an important discourse referent (in this case one of the protagonists), the ‘real’ referent-introduction is done by *uno*. Even if this example provides further evidence for the variable-analysis of indefinites, bound by (existential) operators (here inside the VP³⁴), we want to point out that in Old Italian texts there is very little ambiguity as to the opposition between specific or non-specific interpretation of indefinite noun phrases – Old Italian writers knew “what indefinite to choose” (see the quotation from Kamp, above).

³⁴ Cf. among others Carlson 1977, Heim 1988, Van Geenhoven 1998.

4. Conclusion

A close examination of the textual distribution of the four main Old Italian indefinite determiners *uno*, *alcuno*, *certo* and zero in singular noun phrases in three collections of novellas with respect to 'specific' vs. 'non-specific' contexts and sentential and textual information organization, revealed a rather clear-cut lexical differentiation in Old Italian. *Uno* and *certo* occur preferably with important text referents, while *alcuno* is non-specific (hypothetical) and only slowly acquiring its modern negative value. The function of zero resists any simple classification as 'indefinite', i.e. referent-introducing, being much more common also in the singular than in Modern Italian and having several values (generic, non-referential, non-specific etc.).

Finally, the most astonishing finding is the loss of 'neutrality' of Latin *unus* according to the specific - non-specific opposition in Old Italian. Here, the whole paradigm of the main indefinite determiners allows to treat specificity or non-specificity as a lexical feature of elements. From there on, however, we assist a gradual spread of *uno* also to non-specific contexts from the 14th century to contemporary Standard Italian (cf. tables 6 to 8; simultaneously, *alcuno* is restricted to negative contexts, zero to non-referential ones, and *certo* loses its status as a determiner), where the two possible interpretations of *uno* in ambiguous, particularly in opaque contexts, can be indeed discussed as a matter of syntax³⁵ or even pragmatics³⁶.

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³⁵ Cf. for example Diesing 1992.

³⁶ Cf. for example Groenendijk/Stokhof 1981, Ludlow/Neale 1991.

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