

The emergence of articles in French: diachronic and comparative perspectives

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Although the grammatical category of articles is neither a common typological feature nor an inherited feature of Indo-European, it is widespread in western Indo-European languages, to the point that it has been considered as a “Standard-Average-European” feature. French seems to play a pioneering role in the areal diffusion: the emergence of articles is earlier (both the definite and the indefinite article are attested as early as the 9th century) and the stage of development of the paradigm of articles is more advanced.

The aim of this lecture is to make you discover, through the analysis of texts from different historical stages from classical Latin to modern French, what motivates speakers to recruit expressions as diverse as the distal demonstrative, the numeral of the unit and a prepositional partition marker into the paradigm of articles, and how this development is indicative of a typological shift in grammar.

We'll take a closer look at some of the puzzles surrounding the use of articles. Why does French use the definite article in generic sentences, unlike Germanic languages (e.g. *Les baleines sont des mammifères* vs *Whales are mammals*)? How can we account for the fact that the numeral of the unit is attested in the plural, e.g. *uns yeux*? And why has the plural form disappeared in French, while subsisting in other Romance languages? And how do we explain the development of a third article, the so-called partitive article, composed of *de* and the definite article? Why does this article occur in a truncated form (e.g. *de belles fleurs*), and why is it sometimes missing (e.g. *ce dessert est prepare avec amour/ avec du sel*)?