Problems for the Breton article system

The exhaustive list of the Breton presumed articles is given in (1). Only the /a/ vs. /ə/ vowel alternation encodes syntactico-semantic information: distribution of the associated consonant is phonologically dependent (/n/ before /n, d, t, h/ or vowel; /l/ before /l/; /r/ anywhere else).

(1)  
a. /án, al, ar/  
   an natur, al lapin, ar c’hokodil > the nature, the rabbit, the crocodile  
b. /ən, əl, ər/  
   un natur, əl lapin, ər c’hokodil > a nature, a rabbit, a crocodile

In an older state of the language, a rich gender and number morphology on the article triggered liaison on the following noun. Following reduction of the morphology of articles, the phonological trigger for liaison disappeared, but the liaison remained, leaving in Modern Breton a complex consonant mutation system on the noun. Lenition (/k/>/g/) for example signals a singular feminine noun as in (2a), or a masculine plural noun as in (2b). The article however is still clearly the trigger for consonantic mutation: plural indefinites require article drop and the noun appears un-mutated, independently of gender as in (2c).

(2)  
a. ar grokodilez, ur grokodilez > the/a female crocodile  
   fem sing noun  
b. ar grokodiled > the crocodiles  
   definite masc plural noun  
c. ø krokodiled, ø krokodiled > crocodiles, female crocodiles  
   plural indefinite

To summarize, at the syntactic level, the presumed article system is embodied under a three-value alternation (/a/, /ə/ vs. /ø/). Presence or absence of the article conditions a morphologically complex system of gender and number marking on the noun.

Descriptive grammars assume that the Breton determiner system mimics the French and English one and propose a [+/− definite] divide as in (1). In this paper, I provide new data and reject the [+/− definite] divide as naïve, and present new generalisations that any account of these articles has to account for. The data comes from available descriptive grammars, a crossdialectal broad literature corpus, and ten hours elicitation with a native speaker from the Douarnenez dialect.

First, the /a/ article appears in contexts where its reference can’t be identified by the listener: Breton has a system of analytic demonstratives (3) obligatorily associated with the /a/ article. Like the specific indefinite English this (Prince 1981, Gundel and al. 1993), the demonstrative occurs in contexts where it has not been activated in discourse (4) (contra Schapansky 1996:96: “proximal determiner phrases like en dén-man 'this man' have to have been just previously mentioned or activated in the discourse.”). The /a/ article thus does appear in specific indefinites, where an /ə/ article would be banned (5).

(3)  
ar plac’h-mañ,  
the girl-here  
ar plac’h-se,  
the girl-there  
ar plac’h-hont  
the girl-over.there  
‘this girl’

(4)  
Aet on tre er bar hag aze meas en em gavet gant ar plac’h-se / ar plac’h-mañ.  
gone I.am in in.the bar & there I.have REFLEX found P  
the girl-there/ the girl-here  
Bez’ e oa o kanañ un dra iskis…  
EXPL R was at singing a thing strange  
‘I went into the bar and there was this girl. She was singing a strange song.’

(5)  
* ur plac’h-mañ

The /a/ article also appears in structures referring to specific unknown entities, as illustrated by the reduplication structure in (6). Depending on the dialects, the article can itself be reduplicated. Again, an /ə/ article would be banned.

(6)  
C’hoand am euz da gaoud ar marc’h-mañ (ar) marc’h.  
wish R.1SG have P have the horse-here horse  
‘I want to have a horse.’/’J’ai envie d’avoir tel cheval.’ (specific unknown/uncited)
Second, the /a/ article is not a morphological ostensibilisation tool for semantic specificity: Data so far could suggest that /a/ appears anytime a given construction is semantically specific. This is not the case. The /a/ morpheme does not survive article drop in specificity contexts: it is banned in (7) by the proper noun, despite the deictic marker that signals formation of an analytic demonstrative (compare with (3)); and in (8), by the genitive construction (construct state obligatorily triggers article drop).

(7) ø Marijo-mañ
    Marijo-here > 'Marijo here present'

(8) ø dour(-mañ) lous ar gér
    water-here dirty the town
    ‘This dirty water of town’/’The dirty water of town’

Finally, there is evidence for a complex semantic calculus: the Breton /a/ article can turn a dependent indefinite (namely an 3-FCI) into an independent specific indefinite. The specific unknown indefinite associated with /a/ in (6) does not survive irrealis contexts. The reduplication structure in irrealis contexts requires article-drop (9). I show with extensive evidence that the determinerless reduplication structure is a dependent indefinite: an existential free-choice item. Semantically, any element in the denotation of the restrictor is a suitable candidate for satisfying the nucleus (Jayez and Tovena to appear), and its licensing depends on modality (ex. (10) and table content).

(9) Me meus c’hoant kaout (*ar) stajiad-mañ-stajiad a vefe farsus ha jentil war ar memes tro.
    1SG I have wish have the intern-here-intern R would be funny and nice P the same turn
    ‘I want to have an intern that would be nice and funny at the same time.’

(10) Pouez war touchenn-mañ-touchenn evit derc’hel da vont.
    press on key-here-key for continue P go
    ‘Press any key / whatever key in order to continue.’

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<td>With modalities</td>
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