Postadjectival indefinite article

Piotr Garbacz

University of Oslo

1. Introduction

The postadjectival indefinite article, sometimes also labeled ‘double indefiniteness’, is found in dialects spoken in the Northern Swedish provinces of Västerbotten, Ångermanland, Medelpad, and Jämtland, as well as in the Northern Norwegian dialects, north of the Trøndelag area (Delsing 2003), see the two examples below taken from Delsing (2003: 45):

(1) a. e märskvärdu e selvsje (Swedish)
   a strange a silver_spoon
   ‘A strange silver spoon.’

   b. e stutt e rännkringlut e skaft (Swedish)
   a short a round-crooked a handle
   ‘a short, round-crooked handle.’

The postadjectival indefinite article is absent in both standard and non-standard varieties of Danish, Fennoswedish, Faroese, and Icelandic (Delsing 2003). In contrast to the regular indefinite article, the postadjectival article can also appear in the plural (Marklund 1986:33 ff.). To all appearances, the postadjectival article had a wider distribution in earlier times, e.g in the Swedish provinces of Dalarna and Norrbotten, and the Finnish province of Österbotten (Dahl 2010:103; Delsing 2003:46-48).

In addition to the postadjectival indefinite article described above, there exists another type of this article. This latter type requires a degree element så (and its cognates) in front of the adjective, see the example in (2). It is common in Germanic varieties, with the exception of modern Standard Swedish (Delsing 1993:138-139).

(2) så stort et hus (Danish)
   so big a house
   ‘Such a big house.’
2. Results

2.1 Nordic Syntax Database (NSD)

The acceptance of the postadjectival indefinite article has been tested in the NDS among Norwegian, Swedish and Fenno-Swedish informants. Different variants of the construction were tested: (i) a postadjectival indefinite article following a single adjective, see (3); (ii) a postadjectival indefinite article following a single adjective preceded by the degree element så ‘such’ (which in its turn was preceded by an indefinite article), see (4); (iii) a postadjectival article following an adjective with the degree element så ‘such’, see (5); and (iv) doubling of the indefinite article, see (6). The last construction is apparently not a case of a postadjectival indefinite article, but just a case of article doubling that is treated together with the postadjectival indefinite article here. It may also be interpreted as consisting of an indefinite article and a definite article, as it is analysed by Thráinsson et al. (2004:96) for the Faroese expression eitt kvöldið ‘one of the nights.’

3) Vi såg en svart en häst. (#1216) (Swedish)
   we saw a black a horse
   ‘We saw a black horse.’

4) En så svart en häst har jag aldrig sett förr. (#1217) (Swedish)
   a so black a horse have I never seen before
   ‘I have never seen such a black horse.’

5) a. Så svart en häst har jag aldrig sett förr. (#718) (Swedish)
    so black a horse have I never seen before
    ‘I have never seen such a black horse.’

6) a. En dag-en skal jeg bygge meg ei hytte. (#709) (Norwegian)
    a day_a shall I build myself a cottage
    ‘One day I will build a cottage for myself.’
The acceptance of the above-mentioned constructions is shown in the maps below.

Map 1: Postadjectival indefinite article
(#1216: Vi såg en svart en häst. ‘We saw a black horse.’)
(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score).
Map 2: Doubling of indefinite articles

(#1217: En så svart en häst har jag aldrig sett förr ‘I have never seen such a black horse.’)
(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score).
Map 3: Single indefinite article after an adjective

(#718: Så svart en häst har jag aldrig sett förr. ‘I have never seen such a black horse.’)

(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score).
Map 4: Doubling of the indefinite article of the type ‘en dag en’
(#709: 'En dag-en skal jeg bygge meg ei hytte. 'One day I will build a cottage for myself'.)
(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score).
Among the tested sentences, the #718 is accepted in most places in Scandinavian, followed by #1217 and #1216. The doubling of indefinite article the type en dag- en (#709) is accepted by all the informants in Saltvik on Åland and in Karlsøy in northern Norway (Troms). It is also accepted by older informants in two Norwegian locations: Nord-Trøndelag (Meråker) and Rogaland (Karmøy).

Article doubling with a single adjective preceded by the degree element så 'such', cf. (5) above, is widely accepted in Northern Sweden (in the provinces of Härjedalen, Jämtland, Västerbotten, Dalarna, Medelpad, and Ångermanland) and in Northern Norway (especially in the province of Trøndelag, but also in Nordland, Troms, and Finnmark). In addition, the phenomenon is judged as grammatical in Northwestern Norway (Møre og Romsdal) and in Southeastern Norway (Telemark and Akershus).

Postadjectival article with a single adjective, cf. (3) above, is judged as grammatical only in seven locations in Northern Sweden (the provinces of Härjedalen, Jämtland, and Västerbotten), but among older informants it is accepted also in Northern Norway (Nordland) and in additional locations in Northern Sweden (Dalarna).

Finally, the postadjectival article following an adjective with the degree element så 'such', cf. (4) above, is accepted in the central and northern parts of both Sweden and Norway.

2.2 Nordic Dialect Corpus (NDC)

Indefinite article doubling with a single adjective is attested in the NDC in Norway and Sweden, although there are only a few hits. In Sweden, the construction is found in Medelpad (7), and in Norway it is attested in Nordland (8) and (9), and in Troms (10). Interestingly, the test sentence #1216, that is supposed to test the same construction is judged as ungrammatical by the informants in Ballangen and Sømna, who nevertheless produce it. The distribution is shown in Map 5.

(7) det var ju en naturlig en del av livet här hemma det (Swedish)
   it was ADV a natural a part of life.DEF here at_home it
   'It was a natural part of life here at home.' (indal_om3)

(8) he vi jo hadd en lanng en flått en sommar (Norwegian)
   have we ADV had a long a nice a summer
   '...we have had a long and nice summer.' (ballangen_04gk)

(9) en # ifrå gammaL ti en stor en fin en haga (Norwegian)
   a from old time a big a nice a garden
   '"...an old, big, nice garden' (soemna_04gk)

(10) æ hadde ei svart ei bok (Norwegian)
    I had a black a book
    'I had a black book.' (mefjordvaer_20)
Map 5: Indefinite article doubling with a single adjective as attested in the NDC.

(White = high score)

Doubling of the indefinite article with a single adjective preceded by the degree element så ‘such’ is only found once in the corpus in Troms (11), and the informants also judge the test sentence #1217 as grammatical.

(11) de e en så triveliar en by å være i (Norwegian)
    it is a so nicer a city to be in
    ‘This is a city that is so much nicer to dwell.’ (lavangen_04gk)

The postadjectival article following an adjective with the degree element så ‘such’ is the most frequently attested example of the postadjectival article in the NDC. It is found both in Norway and Denmark, but not in Sweden. In Norway, it is found in the southern regions of Aust-Agder and Telemark, in northwestern Oppland and central Møre og Romsdal and in Troms in Northern Norway, see (12)-(16).

(12) hadde så stor en går menn hann ær mye å (Norwegian)
    had so big a farm but he is much to
    ‘...had such a big farm, but it is much to...’ (soendeled_ma_01)
(13) nzår enn havvnr in så go æin stol så søvvnar n då (Norwegian)
    'When one lands in such a comfortable chair, one falls asleep the.' (nissedal_04gk)

(14) åss hadde så streng æin lærar (Norwegian)
    'We had such a strict teacher.' (lom_03gm)

(15) de e så smalt æi nissje de # marrkede dæi søke inn (Norwegian)
    'It is such a small niche, the market that they target.' (rauma_03gm)

(16) så fikk æ så onnt ei akksel (Norwegian)
    'So my shoulder begun to hurt so much.' (tromsoeysund_ma_01)

In Denmark, the construction is found in Ærø, Nordjylland, and Sjælland, cf. (17) - (19). Interestingly, all of the Danish examples are constructed with the adjective stor 'big'. The Norwegian and Danish results are shown in Map 6 below.

(17) det er så stort et sogn at de er for sig selv (Danish)
    'It is such a big parish that they are an independent unit.' (aeroe1)

(18) på den måde er det inte så stor en grund (Danish)
    'In this way, it is not such a big reason...' (nordjylland1)

(19) jeg er ikke så vild med så stor en by (Danish)
    'I don't like very much such a big city.' (sjaelland2)
Finally, doubling of the indefinite article of the type en dag-en 'one day', is only attested once in Northern Norway, in Nordland (Mo i Rana), see (20). The informant, however, rejects the sentence #709 that is supposed to test the construction in question.

(20) here ein dag-en så va katta borre i to daga (Norwegian)

   here a day-a so was cat.DEF away in to days

   'Here, one day the cat dissapeared for two days.' (mo_i_rana_03gm)

All of the postadjectival indefinite articles tested in the NSD are found in the NDC, the postadjectival article following an adjective followed by the degree element så 'such' being the one found the most ofen. It is also worth mentioning that all the types of postadjectival indefinite article are found only in the Norwegian part of the NDC.
3. Discussion

3.1 General remarks

The postadjectival indefinite article is mostly a Northern Scandinavian phenomenon, according to the literature and to the research infrastructure. In Norway, it is rarely judged as grammatical in the southern parts of the country and it is never attested there in spontaneous speech. In Sweden, it is neither judged as grammatical or attested south of the province of Dalarna. The postadjectival indefinite article in the construction så stort ett hus ‘so big a house’ is most frequently attested, both in the NDC and in the NSD, also in Denmark.

Generally, the picture of postadjectival indefinite articles given in the literature and the picture that emerges from the data gathered in the NSD and the NDC are similar, although not identical. In the research infrastructure, one finds all of the postadjectival article types mentioned in Section 1 above. The biggest differences are found between the spontaneous data of the NDC and the elicited data of the NDS, see 3.3. below.

3.2 Age variation

Generally, the postadjectival article is most often accepted and produced by older speakers. This is especially visible in the case of the postadjectival article following an adjective with the degree marker så 'such', compare the general acceptance of the construction in Map 7 to the acceptance among older speakers in Map 8.

Map 7: General acceptance of (#718).

Map 8: Acceptance of (#718) among older speakers.

( Så svart en häst har jag aldrig sett förr. ‘I have never seen such a black horse.’)

(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score).
The construction *en dag-en* ‘one day’, this is normally rejected in all of Norway, Sweden and Finland, but some older Norwegian speakers in Trøndelag (Meråker, Lierne) and in Rogaland (Karmøy) accept it, see Map 9 below.

Map 9: Acceptance of #709: *(En dag-en skal jeg bygge meg ei hytte. ‘One day I will build a cottage for myself.’)*

*among older speakers*

(*White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score.*)
3.3 Spontaneous data vs. elicited judgment data

There is a certain asymmetry between the two types of data gathered in the infrastructure: the spontaneous and the elicited. The postadjectival indefinite article following a single adjective is judged as grammatical only in Sweden, not in Norway, but the NDC data show clearly that this phenomenon is found in natural speech among the Norwegian informants (interestingly the same informants that produce the construction, consider an example sentence with the same construction as ungrammatical in their dialect). When the adjective is preceded by the degree marker så ‘such’, article doubling is only attested once in the NDC (Lavangen in Northern Norway), whereas it is judged as fully grammatical by a substantial number of both Norwegian and Swedish informants in the NSD. The postadjectival article in the construction så stort ett hus ‘so big a house’ is accepted by about fifty percent of all the Norwegian informants in the NSD, and it is also often found in the NDC. In Sweden, it is though never found in the spontaneous speech, nevertheless it is accepted in the majority of Northern Swedish locations. Finally, the construction en dag-en ‘a day a’ is only accepted by the informants in Karlsøy (Northern Norway), of which no one produces it. Conversely, it is found in the speech of an older female informant in Mo i Rana, who judge it as ungrammatical. The results thus indicate – in line with earlier studies – that judgments and actual speech may differ. It is also apparent that the Swedish part of the corpus – probably due to its small size – does not cover the variation that is present in the spoken language.

References


Delsing, Lars-Olof. 2003. 'Syntaktisk variation i nordiska nominalfraser,' in Vangsnes, Øystein Alexander; Anders Holmberg & Lars-Olof Delsing (eds.) Dialektsyntaktiska studier av den nordiska nominalfrasen, Novus, Oslo, 11-64.


Web sites:

Nordic Atlas of Language Structures (NALS) Journal: http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nals
Nordic Dialect Corpus: http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nota/scandiasyn/index.html
Nordic Syntax Database: http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nota/scandiasyn/index.html