Abstract for regular presentation:

The Functions and Development of the Indefinite Article in Middle English

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Typologically, indefinite articles develop from the numeral '1', a process that was also observed in English during the transition from Old to Middle English around the late 11th century/early 12th century. While significant research has been conducted on said emergence (e.g. Hewson 1997; Crisma 2015; Sommerer 2018), the actual functions of this new functional category received limited attention. This is surprising, considering the notable differences in usage between the numeral and the indefinite article in Present Day English. Consequently, the questions that arise from this gap in research are whether the indefinite article lost its numerical function completely and at what time and what new functions have emerged during the Middle English period. Studying these functions contributes to our understanding of the linguistic development during the Middle English period, particularly in such a pivotal category like the article system.

This study investigates the functions and development of the indefinite article in Middle English as part of a larger comparative study that also examines Middle High German texts. It is based on a qualitative approach and analyzes excerpts from three distinct Middle English texts spanning different time periods – 'Hali Meiðhad' (late 11th c./early 12th c.), Chaucer's 'A Treatise on the Astrolabe' (late 14th c.) and 'The Paston Letters' (15th c.). The analysis shows that the indefinite article has assumed significantly different functions than the numeral '1' during the Middle English period. Most notably, it has been used to mark generic as well as non-specific noun phrases from an early stage. These functions also seem to be closely connected to the genre of the text. For example, they are more prominent in the scientific text than in the religious one. Furthermore, the study also underlines that the indefinite article does not solely function as a marker of concreteness, as has often been seen as one of the main usages of the indefinite article in general (Rissanen 1967: 274; Stark 2006: 108). Instead, it also occasionally assumes the function of marking abstract nouns. It is important to note, however, that this research is based on a small and very selective corpus of texts, and as such, the findings are not representative of the entire Middle English period. Nevertheless, the study sheds light on some of the functions, patterns, and development of the indefinite article in these distinctive texts and provides groundwork for further research.

Sources:

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