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How definite is the definite article in (Italo-)Romance? A protocol approach.

All Romance languages are article-languages that have developed from article-less Latin. The forms and values of the articles are apparently homogeneous. The indefinite singular article for count nouns developed from cardinal *unus* 'one' (1) and, apart from few exceptions, the definite article developed from the discourse anaphoric demonstrative *ille* 'that'(2). This is not surprising, as it is generally noted that these two elements are the source of the formation of new determiners cross-linguistically. Examples are in Italian, but they could be reproduced in all Romance languages:

(1) Ho mangiato una mela / la mela. ('I ate an apple / the apple')

A second common trait is the use of the definite article to signal reference to kind, as is possible in the object of verbs expressing (dis)like (cf. Laca 1990 for Spanish and English, Anscombre 2001 for French):

(2) Adoro *(le) mele / *(la) carne. ('I love [the] apples / meat')

A third quasi-common trait of Romance (with the exception of French) is to have maintained lack of article to express narrow scope indefiniteness in plural count and singular mass nouns (*mele* / *cioccolata*).

(3) Ho mangiato mele / carne. ('I ate apples / meat')
(4) J'ai mangé des pommes / de la viande. ('I ate [of-the] apples / meat')

Most of the languages that allow for bare nominals also have an overt indefinite determiner at least with count plural nouns. The divide across Romance languages is between those that pluralize 'one' (Ibero-Romance and Eastern Romance) and Gallo-Romance varieties and Italian, where the partitive article coexists with bare nouns.
    Cardinaletti and Giusti (2016, 2018, 2020) note that in some contexts the definite article can introduce indefinite nominal expressions thereby observing three possible realizations for narrow scope indefinites, which have a different diatopic distribution across Italian dialects and are all available in the colloquial standard with different rates of preferences only partially mirroring the preferences found in the dialects:

(5)   a. Ieri abbiamo mangiato mele / carne. ('Yesterday, we eat apples')

b. Ieri abbiamo mangiato delle mele / della carne. ('Yesterday, we eat [of-the] apples')

c. Ieri abbiamo mangiato i biscotti / la carne. ('Yesterday, we eat [the] apples')

Notably, the definite article in (5c) cannot be reduced to a case of weak definiteness because it is not possible with a singular count noun (6a), while weak indefinites generally are (6b-c):

(6)   a. #Ieri ho mangiato il biscotto. ('Yesterday, I ate the apple', only definite)

b. Ieri ho comprato la macchina. ('Yesterday, I bought the car', intending: a car)

c. Ieri ho conosciuto la vicina di un mio amico. ('Yest., I met the neighbour of a friend of mine')

The apparent definite article in indefinite nominal expressions (5b-c), weak indefinites (6b-c) and kind-referring nominals (2) has been unified in different ways in formal semantics, advocating weaking of the presupposition of existence (Roberts 2003, Zamparelli 2002, Donazzan 2013, Leonetti 2019, Espinal and Cyrino 2017a,b). I will approach the issue from the opposite side, proposing with Carlson and Sussman (2005) that we are dealing with different (silent) determiners in Spec DP concording with a free morpheme realizing nominal features in D.

Appropriate diagnostics will be presented in the form of a protocol (Giusti 2011 and work after that) to distinguish across these indefinite determiners, capturing the cross-Romance variation, which is particularly rich across Italo-Romance varieties.

The proposal will elaborate on the formal analysis by Giusti (2002, 2015) which treats the article as a free functional morpheme decoding a bundle of nominal features including (abstract) Case, Number, and Gender in the highest head of the nominal spine. Such a morpheme is combined with a determiner in its specifier, which is solely responsible for the interpretation of the nominal expression.