


An Adjunction-Based Approach to Non-Standard Variation (*el microalga, un alita*)*

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Abstract

In Spanish, feminine singular nouns beginning with a stressed /a/, such as *arma* ‘weapon’ and *asa* ‘handle’, do not take the standard article forms *la* and *una*, but *el* and *un*. This paper examines the non-standard uses of *el* and *un* observed in morphologically complex words, such as prefixed nouns (*el microalga*) and diminutives (*un alita*). The hypothesis is that what makes these variants possible is the adjunct status of prefixes and diminutive suffixes. It is claimed that adjuncts do not obligatorily trigger the reassignment of standard forms *la* and *una*, like a head would, because they can be late-merged.

Keywords: article; late-merge; gender; morphology; adjunct

Resum. *Un enfocament basat en l'adjunció per a la variació no estàndard (el microalga, un alita)*

En castellà, els substantius femenins que comencen amb una /a/ estressada, com *arma* ‘weapon’ i *asa* ‘handle’, no prenen l'article estàndard forma *la* i *una*, sinó amb les variants *el* i *un*. Aquest article se centra en les variants no normatives observades en paraules morfològicament complexes, com els substantius prefixats (*el microalga*) i diminutius (*un alita*). La hipòtesi és que el que fa possible aquestes variants és l'estat adjunt de prefixos i sufixos diminutius. S'afirma que els adjunts no indueixen obligatòriament la reassignació de les formes estàndard *la* i *una*, com ho faria un nucli, perquè poden ser *late-merged*.

Paraules clau: article; late-merge; gènere; morfologia; adjunt

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1. Introduction

1.1. Presentation of the data

A well-known fact in both Peninsular and American Spanish grammar is that feminine singular nouns beginning with a stressed /a/, such as *alma* ‘soul’ or *hada* ‘fairy’, take the article forms or allomorphs /el/ and /un/ (RAE & ASALE 2009: §14.2b; §15.1b) (1):

- | | |
|---|---|
| (1) <i>el alma dormida</i>
the-sg soul-F.sg asleep-F.sg
‘the soul asleep’

<i>un hada mágica</i>
a-sg fairy-F.sg magic-F.sg
‘a magic fairy’ | <i>las almas dormidas</i>
the-F.pl soul-F.pl asleep-F.pl
‘the souls asleep’

<i>unas hadas mágicas</i>
a-F.pl fairy-F.pl magic-F.pl
‘magic fairies’ |
|---|---|

These forms historically arise from the apocope of -a in the original feminine forms of the articles, *ela* and *una* (Ortiz Ciscomani 2009: 295; Garachana 2009: 452) (2):

- (2) *Cofondate Dios en este siglo el cuerpo, et en el otro **ela** alma.*
 ‘God grant you the body in this age, and **the soul** in the age to come.’
 (Fuero de Usagre, 1242-1275, *apud* CORDE)
- por poner corazón a los que le quedavan, hízoles **una** habla en esta forma:*
 ‘To embolden those who were left, he made **a speech** to them in this way.’
 (Cárcel de amor, 1482-92, *apud* CORDE)

The forms in (1) before singular feminine nouns coincide, as can be easily verified, with the current masculine forms of the articles, *el* and *un* (3):

- (3) *el olmo viejo*
 the-M.sg elm-M.sg old-M.sg
 ‘the old elm’

un hado adverso
 a-M.sg fate-M.sg tragic-M.sg
 ‘a tragic fate’

In fact, for some authors, contemporary speakers have reanalyzed these forms as masculine, given that the historical origin of these variants does not necessarily have to be relevant in their synchronic distribution (Janda & Varela-García 1991; Eddington & Hualde 2008).¹ It is highly plausible that the homophony of /el/ and /un/ with the masculine forms has prompted the analogical expansion of masculine forms of other determiners before feminine nouns with stressed /a/, forms which historically do not stem from the apocope of *-a* in a feminine article (4). Although considered non-standard, these variants are quite prevalent; however, this paper will focus specifically on the articles /el/ and /un/.

- (4) *Este aula siempre se queda vacía.*

this-M.sg classroom-F.sg

‘This classroom always remains empty.’

Localizaron otro arma ilegal en el piso de al lado.

locate-P.3.pl other-M.sg weapon-F.sg

‘Another illegal weapon was located in the flat next door.’

The situation would be relatively straightforward if all the variation in determiner choice could be accounted for by substituting feminine forms with masculine ones, thereby avoiding the adjacency of identical sounds /la.alma/ /una.alma/ /esta.alma/. This would suggest a purely phonetic motivation for the replacement, a phenomenon commonly observed across languages (cf. *Obligatory Contour Principle*, Prince & Smolensky 2004).

However, several aspects of variation in article selection warrant further investigation, as phonetic factors alone cannot explain the distribution of the variants.

As shown below, the use of the variants /el/ and /un/ is restricted to nouns beginning with stressed /a/ (5a), but does not extend to adjectives (5b).

- (5) a. *el/un alta laboral*

the/a-sg register-F.sg working-F.sg

‘the working registration’

- b. *la/una alta participación*

the/a-F.sg high-F.sg participation-F.sg

‘the/a high participation’

Originally, however, the distribution of /el/ and /un/ was indeed indifferent to the word class (noun or adjective) (6a); the use of /el/ and /un/ also extended to nouns beginning with other vowels, not necessarily stressed (6b) (RAE & ASALE 2009: §14.2r; §15.1g):

1. From a historical perspective, the claim that the masculine *el* and the feminine *el* are the same form is unsustainable. The accusative *illam* is the historical source of the feminine *el*, while the nominative *ille* is the historical source of the masculine *el*.

- (6) a. *A vos dexo yo **el** alta eloquencia.*
 ‘To you I leave **the high** eloquence.’
 (Cancionero de Gómez Manrique, 1450-1480, *apud* CORDE)
- b. *Depues que fueren uelados e **el** esposa fuere corronpida, las uestiduras ssean **del** esposa, maguer que el marido sea muerto.*
 ‘Once they are married and **the wife** has been deflowered, the clothes belong to **the wife**, even if the husband dies.’
 (Fuero de Alarcón, 1300, *apud* CORDE)

In summary, what we observe is that the original motivation for the variation appears to be strictly phonetic, as it is unaffected by grammatical factors such as word class and is determined by vowel adjacency between words. The restriction of the variants /el/ and /un/ to nouns beginning with stressed /a/ indicates the grammaticalization of the distribution, a process believed to have begun in the 18th century (RAE & ASALE 2009: §14.2r; 15.1g).

Additional factors further diminish the phonological motivation underlying the distribution of /el/ and /un/. The second such factor is that the variation is conditioned by the type of noun. Thus, grammars indicate that nouns referring to women (7a), to toponyms (7b), or to the names of letters (7c), may or should be exempt from the selection of /el/ and /un/, which would otherwise apply due to the initial stressed /a/ (Leonetti 1999: 790; RAE & ASALE 2009: §14.2j-p; §15.1e):

- (7) a. *la árbitro una árabe la Ana una Ángela*
 the-F.sg referee-sg a-F.sg Arab-sg the-F.pl Anne a-F.sg Angela
 ‘the women referee’ ‘an Arab woman’ ‘Anne’ ‘one Angela’
- b. *serie ambientada en la **Ámsterdam** de 1686 una **Ávila** catatónica*
 ‘series set in 1686 Amsterdam’ ‘a catatonic Ávila’
- c. *la hache*
 ‘the letter H’

Although this paper will not specifically address this phenomenon, it will be revisited in the final section. For now, the only point I wish to emphasize with the examples in (7) is this: if the determining factor in the distribution of /el/ and /un/ were strictly phonetic, nouns like *Ana* or *hache*, which have a stressed /a/ contiguous to the article, should select /el/ and /un/ regardless of their class.²

2. In RAE & ASALE (2009: §14.2t-u; §15.1h), it is shown that compound words such as *la agua-panela* (Co., ‘a kind of water with sugar’), or *la avefría* ‘lapwing’, avoid the selection of /el/, or that it is over-applied in words without stressed /a/, such as *el aguachirle* ‘flavorless water’, and *el agusal* ‘salt water’. It is preferable to exclude compounds from any discussion, because factors such as exocentricity or the loss of stress of the first member of the compound come into play.

1.2. Variation concerning derived words

This study investigates a specific type of variation in the selection of /el/ and /un/, which departs even more noticeably from the original phonetic motivation. The first focus of inquiry, thus far unexplored to the best of my knowledge, concerns prefixed words involving nouns beginning with stressed /a/. Crucially, these forms retain the allomorphs /el/ and /un/, thus challenging the anticipated phonological requirement for adjacency between the article and the noun (8):

- (8) *el ciber aula*
 the-sg cyber- classroom-F.sg
 ‘the cyber classroom’
un super arma
 a-sg super- weapon-F.sg
 ‘a super weapon’

This pattern of variation exhibits similar characteristics to that observed in (9). In these examples, /el/ and /un/ are similarly retained, despite the presence of a prenominal adjective intervening between the article and the noun.

- (9) *El nuevo aula estará ubicado en uno de los edificios adyacentes*
 ‘The new classroom will be located in one of the adjacent buildings.’
 (Elcomercio.es, *apud* Corpus del español NOW) ³
Pero la espada no era el único arma de los samuráis.
 ‘But the sword was not the only weapon of the samurai.’
 (ABC.es, *apud* Corpus del español NOW) ⁴

First, it is important to highlight the naturalness with which these variants occur, particularly in written sources subject to a certain degree of normative control, as illustrated in (9). It is crucial to observe that in neither (8) nor (9) is there adjacency between the article and the noun, a condition that would ordinarily require the selection of the allomorphs /la/ and /una/ (Leonetti 1999: 790).

However, there is a difference between (8) and (9), namely that the prenominal adjectives appear in masculine form. This raises the issue of the possible reassignment of masculine gender to the articles or even the nouns themselves (Bonet, Lloret & Mascaró 2015), which will be revisited in section 3. In contrast, prefixes lack gender, meaning that the variation in (8) does not involve the gender of the modifier. For this reason, in this paper variants such as *el ciberaula* and *un super-arma* are considered in relation to another type of variation occurring within the morphological domain, illustrated by (10):

3. <<https://www.elcomercio.es/asturias/cuencas/laviana-dota-escuela-20180617003038-ntvo.html>>.

4. <https://www.abc.es/historia/abci-samurais-y-ninjas-grandes-mentiras-historicas-sobre-guerreiros-mas-letales-japon-201906232329_noticia.html>.

- (10) *el* *alita*
 the-sg wing-DIM.F
 ‘the small wing’
- un* *agüita*
 a-sg water-DIM.F
 ‘a little water’

In (10), *agüita* and *alita* continue to combine with the forms /el/ and /un/, despite the addition of the suffix, which shifts the stress, thereby causing the nouns to no longer begin with a stressed /a/ – the second phonological requirement for the distribution of standard /el/ and /un/, alongside contiguity. This phenomenon was first noted by Harris (1987) and is discussed in RAE & ASALE (2009), although it has not been thoroughly analyzed.

1.3. Theoretical implications

We will see in Section 2 that the variants illustrated in (8) and (10), although not the majority choice among Spanish speakers, are sufficiently represented, even in written texts. The existence of this variation in the morphological domain raises questions with important theoretical implications, particularly in the case of (8). In a lexicalist theoretical model (see Lieber & Scalise 2006 for a review), the combination of a noun (e.g., *arma*) with the prefix (*super-*) would occur in the lexicon, as it involves a morphological operation. In this component, an “atom” would be formed before syntax (*superarma*). If this were the case, the allomorphs /el/ and /un/ could never be selected at the moment of article assignment, because the information indicating that the derived word contains a noun beginning with stressed /a/ would not remain accessible. However, in the variants of (8), the article selected is the one that corresponds to the noun prior to the addition of the prefix.

However, in a neoconstructionist model, such as Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz 1993) or Nanosyntax (Starke 2009), in which both complex words and phrases are derived syntactically, it is possible to establish a structural parallelism between *un superarma* ‘a superweapon’ and *un gran arma* ‘a big weapon’ that is, between the phenomena in (8-9).

Additionally, this analysis focuses on what is shared between the prefixed words in (8) and the suffixed words in (10). Following Eguren (2001), it is proposed that both prefixes and diminutive suffixes that allow the retention of the forms /el/ and /un/ of the article share the condition of adjuncts.

The reasoning is as follows: when a syntactic head attaches to nouns beginning with stressed /a/, as is the case when the functional head *Number* (Ritter 1992) pluralizes the noun (*arma*+s), the default form /las/ must be spelled-out (*las armas*, never **los armas*). However, as happens with adjectives *nuevo* ‘new’ and *único* ‘only’ in (9), modifiers do not necessarily trigger the replacement of the article. The hypothesis is that what occurs in the word syntax with *superarma* or *agüita* in (8) and (10) is exactly the same: the adjunct condition of prefixes and diminutive suffixes in these words prevents the obligatory reassignment of the article.

1.4. Organization of the paper

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 describes the variants and the methodology used in their identification. Section 3 provides an overview of previous studies on the choice of non-standard variants of determiners before nouns beginning with a stressed /a/. Section 4 presents the analysis based on the argument of the adjunct condition of certain prefixes and diminutive suffixes. This section also discusses which properties attributed to adjuncts in formal theoretical frameworks (specifically, their merge from separate derivational spaces and late insertion) allow for a more appropriate analysis of the variation studied. The paper concludes with a discussion and conclusions section.

2. The unexpected distribution of /el/ and /un/ in derived words

2.1. Variants in prefixed words

The investigation was initiated as a result of an incidental observation made at the Aragonia cinema halls (Zaragoza, Spain) during the screening of the Star Wars films in December 2023. While watching the film, a teenager of about 15 years old, seated in the adjacent row, was overheard saying: *Ahora van a sacar el super-arma galáctica* ‘Now they’re going to release the galactic superweapon’. Upon hearing this utterance, I consulted several informants within my circle to assess its acceptability. Subsequently, I conducted a systematic search for prefixed variants of an exhaustive list of Spanish nouns beginning with stressed /a/.⁵ This search was performed using the *Corpus del Español Now*, applying the query: [article_ *noun] (*el *arma*, *un *aula*, etc.). Results were occasionally cross-referenced and supplemented by Google searches. From these results, prefixed words were selected, and their exact representation in the sources was verified.

Examples (10) to (14) compile all instances of prefixed words derived from stressed /a/ nouns that preserve the allomorphs of the articles corresponding to their unprefixed base forms (*el* and *un*). The frequency of these non-standard variants, alongside the standard forms (with *la* and *una*), is provided to facilitate a comparison of their occurrence within the corpus. Contextual information and source links are also included to allow readers to examine the examples within their context. These sources indicate that the variation under analysis occurs equally in both Peninsular and American Spanish.

5. These 21 nouns have been specifically reviewed: *agua* ‘water’, *ala* ‘wing’, *ave* ‘bird’, *aula* ‘classroom’, *área* ‘area’, *alga* ‘algae’, *arma* ‘weapon’, *arca* ‘ark’, *arpa* ‘harp’, *ancla* ‘anchor’, *alma* ‘soul’, *asa* ‘handle’, *asta* ‘horn’, *aspa* ‘blade’, *águila* ‘eagle’, *haba* ‘bean’, *habla* ‘speech’, *hacha* ‘axe’, *hada* ‘fairy’, *acta* ‘record’, *anca* ‘hip’. Excluded are those like *arte* ‘art’ or *hambre* ‘hunger’, which are ambiguous regarding gender. Others, such as *álgebra* ‘algebra’, *ansia* ‘longing’, and *alba* ‘down’, are not very significant because they even resist diminutivization. *Albita* is a feminine proper name and always takes *la* and *una*.

(10) **Noun: *alga* ‘algae’**

Prefixed variants with /el/ and /un/: *el microalga* ‘the microalgae’.

No. of occurrences: 10.

No. of occurrences of the standard variants (*la microalga*): 248.

Example in context:

*La ASP no está provocada por el microalga que acostumbra a castigar a Galicia con esa toxicidad.*⁶

‘ASP is not caused by the microalgae that usually punishes Galicia with such toxicity.’

(11) **Noun: *área* ‘area’**

Prefixed variants with /el/ and /un/: *el subárea* ‘the subarea’, *un subárea* ‘a subarea’, *el macroárea* ‘the macroarea’, *un superárea* ‘a superarea’.

No. of occurrences: 13.

No. of occurrences of the standard variants (*la subárea*, *una subárea*, etc.): 160.

Examples in context:

(...) *revelaron que los militares salieron del subárea de pacificación.*⁷

‘(...) revealed that the military left the pacification sub-area.’

*Quieren volver a cambiar un subárea para que sea de preservación permanente.*⁸

‘They want to change a sub-area back to permanent preservation.’

*Ese puesto colgaba del macroárea liderada por Ana María Bordas.*⁹

‘This post was held by the macro-area led by Ana María Bordas.’

(...) *estará la de oncología –gran referente de la clínica universitaria–, y un superárea de salud de la mujer.*¹⁰

‘(...) there will be the oncology department -the main reference point of the university clinic- and a women’s health super area.’

(12) **Noun: *arma* ‘weapon’**

Prefixed variants with /el/ and /un/: *el ciberarma* ‘the cyberweapon’, *un ciberarma* ‘a cyberweapon’, *el superarma* ‘the superweapon’, *un antiarma* ‘an anti-weapon’.

No. of occurrences: 15.

No. of occurrences of the standard variants (*la ciberarma*, *una ciberarma*, etc.): 33.

Examples in context:

6. <https://www.lavozdeg Galicia.es/noticia/somosmar/2018/07/24/marea-roja-excepcional-cierra-ria-vigo-extraccion-marisco/0003_201807G24P28991.htm>.

7. <<https://www.ultimahora.com/terroristas-del-epp-probaron-fusiles-que-robaron-militares-matarlos-n1020483>>.

8. <<https://www.elancasti.com.ar/politica-economia/2016/5/15/dudas-cambios-normativa-regula-suelo-298068.html>>.

9. <<https://www.elmundo.es/television/2016/05/26/5746ceb8468aebf8798b4688.html>>.

10. <https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/madrid/2017-06-02/clinica-navarra-madrid-otono-20-000-curriculums_1391412/>.

*El periódico especifica que **el ciberarma** en el caso de Corea del Norte (...).*¹¹
 ‘The newspaper specifies that the cyber weapon in the case of North Korea (...).’
*Le propusieron a Bush el desarrollo de **un ciberarma** ultrasofisticada e inédita.*¹²

‘They proposed to Bush the development of an ultra-sophisticated and unprecedented cyber-weapon.’

*(...) han firmado esta propuesta, apoyando la creación del **superarma** espacial.*¹³

‘(...) have signed this proposal, supporting the creation of the space super-weapon.’

***Un antiarma** biológica sirve para prevenir una catástrofe global.*¹⁴

‘A biological anti-weapon serves to prevent a global catastrophe.’

(13) **Noun: aula ‘classroom’**

Prefixed variants with /el/ and /un/: **el ciberaula** ‘the cyberclassroom’, **el hiperaula** ‘the hyperclassroom’, **el ecoaula** ‘the eco-classroom’, **el teleaula** ‘the teleclassroom’.

No. of occurrences: 15.

No. of occurrences of the standard variants (*la ciberaula*, etc.): 75.

Examples in context:

*En **el ciberaula** hay ordenadores, juegos de todo tipo, cuentos, material para hacer manualidades.*¹⁵

‘In the cyber classroom there are computers, games of all kinds, stories, material for making handicrafts.’

*(...) construir lo que el sociólogo español Mariano Fernández Enguita denomina “**el hiperaula**”: un espacio flexible, colaborativo.*¹⁶

‘(...) to build what the Spanish sociologist Mariano Fernández Enguita calls “el hiperaula”: a flexible, collaborative space.’

*(...) conceptos que se imparten en los talleres medioambientales del **ecoaula** de Los Ruices.*¹⁷

‘(...) concepts that are taught in the environmental workshops of the Los Ruices eco-classroom.’

*El evento tuvo sitio en **el teleaula** del Cearte.*¹⁸

‘The event took place in the tele-classroom of the Cearte.’

11. <<https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/232555-trump-heredar-ciberguerra-misiles-corea-norte>>.

12. <<https://www.eltelegrafo.com.ec/noticias/columnistas/1/hackers-rusos-al-servicio-de-la-causa-catalana>>.

13. <<https://www.20minutos.es/noticia/1669516/0/construccion/estrella-de-la-muerte/obama/>>.

14. <<https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/view/52240-guerra-robots-escenario-posible-eeuu-2025>>.

15. <https://sevilla.abc.es/sevilla/sevi-mas-500-voluntarios-hacen-mas-llevadero-hospital-en-fermos-navidad-201812232149_noticia.html>.

16. <<https://www.nacion.com/blogs/cambio-educativo/cuando-el-director-del-colegio-deja-de-ser-lider/AVKYZUCW7JCFDLT6S6HU2H4AEU/story/>>.

17. <<https://www.lavanguardia.com/local/sevilla/20180403/442159746451/ecologistas-de-bee-garden-instalan-una-decena-de-colmenas-en-el-centro-ambiental-para-fomentar-su-biodiversidad.html>>.

18. <<https://www.elvigia.net/vida/2017/9/23/presenta-confidencias-283538.html>>.

(14) **Noun: *habla* ‘speech’**

Prefixed variants with /el/ and /un/: *el ciberhabla* ‘the cyber-speech’.

No. of occurrences: In this case, no instances were found in the corpus; however, Google searches yield results for both variants. We collected this one from a paper.

Example in context:

*La CMO está compuesta por un lenguaje verbal, **el ciberhabla**, y otro no verbal.*¹⁹

‘CMO is composed of a verbal language, cyber-speech, and a non-verbal language.’

As observed, the sample of prefixed nouns beginning with stressed /a/ is limited, as it was not possible to document cases derived from *ala*, *ave*, *águila*, *hada*, or *agua*. The scarcity of additional cases may be attributed to conceptual constraints, that is, the difficulty in forming meaningful prefixed constructions. For instance, while *superáguila* ‘super-eagle’ might be conceivable, terms like *ciberagua* ‘cyber-water’ or *teleave* ‘tele-bird’ are not. Although forms such as *el autohabla* ‘the auto-talk’ and *el autoarpa* ‘the auto-harp’ were also documented, they must be excluded from further analysis, as it is unclear whether the selection of /el/ is due to the prefix or to the noun itself.

To support the argument regarding the adjunct condition of the prefixes presented in (10-14), which will be developed in Section 4, it is important to note that not all classes of existing prefixes are represented (Varela & Martín García 1999; RAE & ASALE 2009: §10.5-12). Negative prefixes like *des-* are absent (only *anti-* has been documented, which denotes ‘unfavorable attitude’, but it is not strictly a negative prefix), nor are temporal prefixes like *pre-* or aspectual ones like *re-*. While locative suffixes like *sub-* or *super-* have been identified, they have only been documented with a gradative value.²⁰ Predominant are prefixes expressing quantity (*macro-*) and degree (*super-*, *hiper-*). Also present are *eco-* and *ciber-*, which exhibit a marked adjunct character. In fact, both *eco-* and *ciber-* are prefixes of recent creation, formed by the shortening of adjectives. Additionally, there exist forms such as *neohabla* ‘neo-speech’ and *pseudohabla* ‘pseudo-speech’ with adjectival prefixes, though these do not exhibit the article variation under consideration – although it is predicted that such forms might exist or be deemed acceptable by speakers.

19. <<https://ojs.ual.es/ojs/index.php/IBAL/article/download/3485/3978/12894>>.

20. This fact may be relevant to the main hypothesis of this article, since locative prefixes in parasynthetic constructions such as *subterráneo* or *superestructural* play the role of prepositional heads, rather than modifiers (Marqueta 2018). It is present in our sample the prefix *tele-*, usually considered locative due to its meaning, but which in no case relates diachronically or synchronically to a prepositional locative head.

2.2. Variants in words with diminutive suffixes

The following section presents the usage data of /el/ and /un/ with feminine words beginning with stressed /a/ and bearing a diminutive suffix. Unlike the prefixal variation discussed previously, this phenomenon has already been noted in the literature. RAE & ASALE (2009: §14.2s) document forms such as *el agüita* ‘the little water’ and *el alita* ‘the small wing’, although they recommend the standard forms *la agüita* and *la alita*. As in the previous section, the starting point was the list of 21 nouns beginning with stressed /a/. The search queries used in the *Corpus del Español NOW* were: [article_noun*] (e.g., *el had**), or the complete form incorporating the most common diminutive suffixes (-ita, -ica, -illa).

Examples (15) to (23) compile all the documented cases for each noun, following the same scheme as in the previous section. As before, the variation is attested in both Peninsular and American varieties of Spanish, although there appears to be a slightly higher incidence of diminutive-suffixed forms in the latter.

(15) Noun: *agua* ‘water’

Suffixed variants with /el/ and /un/: *el agüita, un agüita, el agüica, el agüilla* (all of them means ‘the little water’ or ‘a little water’ in different regions of Spain).

No. of occurrences: 142.

No. of occurrences of the standard variants (*la agüita, una agüita*): 140.

Examples in context:

*Si hasta **el agüita** que bebo te la tengo que pedir.*²¹

‘If even the water I drink I have to ask you for it.’

*Cuando cae **un agüita** esto se convierte en una laguna.*²²

‘When a little water falls, it becomes a lagoon.’

*José estará encantado del **agüica** que está cayendo para reverdecer los pastos.*²³

‘José will be delighted with the little water that is falling to green the pastures.’

*al son del **agüilla** de la fuente, los operarios envuelven en cartón (...).*²⁴

‘The workers wrap cardboard around the fountain to the sound of the little water. (...)’

(16) Noun: *ala* ‘wing’

Suffixed variants with /el/ and /un/: *el alita* ‘the small wing’, *un alita* ‘the small wing’.

No. of occurrences: 18.

No. of occurrences of the standard variants (*la alita*): 50.

Examples in context:

21. <<https://www.elmundo.es/cultura/laesferadepapel/2019/04/03/5c991f0bfc6c83c0738b461c.html>>.

22. <<http://nuevaprensa.com.ve/node/6346>>.

23. <<https://www.elperiodicodearagon.com/cultura/2016/11/23/ultimo-trobador-46990608.html>>.

24. <https://www.abc.es/sevilla/ciudad/sevi-mariano-bellver-llorado-despidiendome-cuadros-201806262046_noticia.html>.

*Ella siempre terminaba comiéndose **el alita**.*²⁵

‘She always ended up eating the small wing.’

*Se lastimó **un alita** por efecto del viento.*²⁶

‘The bird injured its wing in the wind.’

(17) **Noun: alma ‘soul’**

Suffixed variants with /el/ and /un/: **el almita** ‘the dear soul’, **un almita** ‘a little soul’.

No. of occurrences: 18.

No. of occurrences of the standard variants (*la amita*, *una almita*): 22.

Examples in context:

*Yo les obligo, porque si no **el almita** viene a sorprender, aquí en el pueblo ha pasado.*²⁷

‘I force them, because otherwise the dear soul comes to surprise, here in the village it has happened.’

*Yo propose hacer un personaje con **un almita** muy frágil y débil.*²⁸

‘I proposed to make a character with a very fragile and weak small soul.’

(18) **Noun: arca ‘ark’**

Suffixed variants with /el/ and /un/: **el arquita** ‘the small ark’.

No. of occurrences: 1.

No. of occurrences of the standard variants (*la arquita*): 1.

Example in context:

***El Arquita** de Noé te ofrece: Minicakes, galletitas, muffins.*²⁹

‘Noah’s small ark offers you: Minicakes, biscuits, muffins.’

(19) **Noun: asa ‘handle’**

Suffixed variants with /el/ and /un/: **el asita** ‘the small handle’.

There are no occurrences of this variant or the normative one (*la asita*) in the corpus. However, several examples can be found online.

Example in context:

*Qué crack se agarra **al asita**, pero no se pone el cinturón.*³⁰

‘What a cracker he holds on to the handle, but doesn’t put on his belt.’

(20) **Noun: aula ‘classroom’**

Suffixed variants with /el/ and /un/: **el/un aulita** ‘the/a small classroom’.

No. of occurrences: 6.

25. <<http://mesaredonda.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2018/05/13/mi-madre/>>.

26. <<https://www.diariodecuyo.com.ar/>>.

27. <<https://www.eluniverso.com/guayaquil/2017/11/03/nota/6463219/mesa-servida-musica-se-rinde-culto-difuntos-comunas/>>.

28. <<https://www.pagina12.com.ar/174421-yo-no-me-propuse-hacer-reir>>.

29. <https://www.findglocal.com/GT/Santa-Luc%C3%ADa-Cotzumalguapa/100263696016248/El-arquita-de-No%C3%A9#google_vignette>.

30. <<https://forocoches.com/foro/showthread.php?t=1670218>>.

No. of occurrences of the standard variants (*la aulita*): 4.

Examples in context:

***El aulita** donde la encontramos, repleta de colores (...).*³¹

‘The little classroom where we found it, full of colours (...)’

*Y en **un aulita** del subsuelo está Juan L. Ortiz dando clases para 4 o 5 poetas.*³²

‘And in a small basement classroom. Juan L. Ortiz is teaching a class for 4 or 5 poets.’

(21) **Noun: ave ‘bird’**

Suffixed variants with /el/ and /un/: ***el/un avecilla*** ‘the/a small bird’.

No. of occurrences: 9.

No. of occurrences of the standard variants (*la avecica, la avecilla, una ave-cilla*): 28.

Examples in context:

*El **del avecilla** que hablaba con Maduro fue el primer episodio, pero hubo más.*³³

‘The little bird talking to Maduro was the first episode, but there were more.’

*El chollonco es **un avecilla** que crece en valles (...).*³⁴

‘The chollonco is a small bird that grows in valleys (...).’

(22) **Noun: habla ‘talk’**

Suffixed variants with /el/ and /un/: ***el hablilla*** ‘the small talk’. There are no occurrences of either this variant or the normative (*la hablilla*) in the corpus.

The example is taken from the web.

Example in context:

*A veces se dice en **el hablilla** popular.*³⁵

‘Sometimes it’s said in popular small talk.’

(23) **Noun: hacha ‘axe’**

Suffixed variants with /el/ and /un/: ***un hachita*** ‘a little axe’.³⁶

No. of occurrences: 4.

No. of occurrences of the standard variants (*una hachita*): 3.

Examples in context:

*Seis soldados con **un hachita**.*³⁷

‘Six soldiers with a little axe.’

31. <<https://www.granma.cu/cuba/2015-06-24/aulas-hospitalarias-donde-habita-la-bondad>>.

32. <<https://www.infobae.com/america/cultura-america/2017/04/04/saer-se-pensaba-como-poeta/>>.

33. <<https://www.abc.es/internacional/20140303/abci-apariciones-hugo-chavez-201402281730.html>>.

34. <<https://entretenimiento.terra.com.pe/famosos/tiempo-de-viaje-da-a-conocer-el-chollonco-de-oro,-c9904a7a8754d310VgnVCM20000099cceb0aRCRD.html>>.

35. <<https://www.noticiasdealava.eus/sociedad/2011/04/29/cuatro-vascos-altas-tasas-colesterol-1814695.html>>.

36. There are 61 attestations of *el hachita* lit. the small axe, ‘an ace’, but it is a nickname for a male. Therefore, the use of /el/ is motivated by this fact rather than the one we are interested in.

37. <https://diariodecuba.com/cuba/1507391997_34478.html>.

The sample of nouns suffixed with diminutives is, as can be observed, larger and more diverse than that of prefixed ones, encompassing variants with /el/ and /un/ for 9 out of the 21 nouns. This pattern is plausibly attributable to the fact that nouns impose fewer conceptual constraints on their combination with diminutives (Lázaro Mora 1999: 4651), since, in cases where the base noun does not admit a reduction in size (e.g., *alma* ‘soul’), the diminutive conveys an affective nuance instead.

Although several diminutive suffixes exist, the suffix *-ita* predominates across the data. However, the restriction on the selection of appreciative suffixes that is of greatest interest for the purposes of this study – and which will be revisited in Section 4.1 – is the following: the suffixes attested in (15–23) do not substantially alter the grammatical properties of their base nouns. Of these properties, gender is the most relevant from a grammatical perspective. When nouns beginning with stressed /a/ combine with other diminutive or augmentative suffixes, such as *-ón* or *-ote*, as shown in (24), the variation between /el-un/ and /la-una/ is no longer observed.

(24)	<i>el/#la</i>	<i>arca</i>	<i>el/*la</i>	<i>arcón</i>
	the-sg	ark-F	the-M.sg	ark-Aum.M
	‘the ark’		‘the chest’	
	<i>un/#una</i>	<i>ancla</i>	<i>un/*una</i>	<i>anclote</i>
	a-sg	anchor-F	a-M.sg	anchor-Dim.M
	‘an anchor’		‘a small anchor’	

2.3. Preliminary summary of the properties of words that permit variation in article selection

Before proceeding to the next section, a brief review of the common properties observed thus far is in order. A substantial proportion of the nouns beginning with stressed /a/ (13 out of 21) display either a prefixed variant (e.g., *el superarma*) or a diminutive-suffixed variant (e.g., *un aulita*) where the article allomorph corresponding to the base form is occasionally preserved.

While the expected variants (*la superarma*, *la aulita*) exhibit a higher frequency, in certain cases – such as those illustrated in (15), (20), and (23) – the non-standard variant actually surpasses the standard form in corpus frequency. Nevertheless, what is particularly noteworthy is not the absolute number of occurrences of /el/ and /un/ with these derived forms, but rather the fact that such variation extends to more than half of the nouns examined.³⁸

38. As an anonymous reviewer points out, it is noticeable that the use of non-normative variants exceeds the number of normative ones only in the case of suffixed words like *agüita* and *aulita*, not in the prefixed ones. Future research may determine whether that difference is caused by the different functionality of the morphemes, or by phonological differences between the affixation processes.

Restrictions concerning the types of prefixes and suffixes involved, which point toward their common status as adjuncts, have already been noted and will be further explored in Section 4.

Another relevant aspect warrants attention: irrespective of whether the article form used is the prescribed one, the prefixed and suffixed words listed in (10–24) are generally of low frequency and retain a fully compositional meaning derivable from their base and affix. Among the prefixed words, only *microalga* is attested in the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española (DLE)*. Among the diminutive forms, *agüita*, *hablilla*, and *avecilla*, are in the *DLE*, although not with the corpus meanings observed here. As is well known, diminutive forms are typically included in the dictionary only when they acquire a lexicalized meaning (RAE & ASALE 2009: §9.3), and none of the 16 diminutives recorded with the /el/ and /un/ variants exhibit such lexicalization.

3. Previous theoretical approaches to non-standard variants

This section surveys previous studies that have analyzed non-standard variation in article selection before nouns beginning with stressed /a/.

Álvarez de Miranda (1993) offers the most comprehensive analysis to date, addressing both diachronic and synchronic aspects of the phenomenon. Drawing on examples from a range of registers and periods – including authors such as Fray Luis de Granada and Antonio Machado – Álvarez de Miranda demonstrates the significant prevalence of variation in article selection, irrespective of normative standards.

With respect to prefixed constructions such as *el superarma*, the most closely related phenomenon – given that it likewise does not require adjacency between article and noun – is that of phrases in which a noun beginning with stressed /a/ is modified by a prenominal masculine adjective and a postnominal feminine adjective (25). These constructions have received considerable attention in the literature and are often referred to as “hermaphroditic nouns” (Eddington & Hualde 2008: 9):

- (25) *el nuevo aula magna*
 the-sg new-M.sg classroom-F magna-F
 ‘The new magna hall.’
- El mismo arma empleada en el crimen.*
 the-sg same-M.sg weapon-F.sg used-F in the crime
 ‘The same weapon used in the crime.’

Many studies assume that the occurrence of prenominal masculine adjectives can only be explained by positing that the articles appearing in these phrases are themselves masculine (Janda & Varela-García 1991; Eddington & Hualde 2008). According to this view, agreement in forms like *el agua* would have undergone a reanalysis as masculine, thereby facilitating analogical extensions such as *este agua* ‘this water’ and *poco agua* ‘little water’. The works of Bonet (2013, 2018) and Bonet, Lloret & Mascaró (2015), adopting a *Stratal Optimality Theory* frame-

work (Bermúdez-Otero 2018), advance this analysis by proposing that it is the nouns themselves, rather than the determiners, that lose their feminine feature for the purposes of agreement with prenominal modifiers. This instruction is encoded in the lexical entry of the involved nouns – only a small subset – and is implemented postsyntactically, in the PF component, rather than in syntax. In the syntactic component, agreement with postnominal modifiers is established in the first cycle, invariably yielding feminine morphology via a specifier-head configuration. By contrast, prenominal agreement, which is structurally weaker, is determined post-syntactically and regulated by CONCORD, a family of constraints that ensures faithfulness and regularity of agreement across the nominal domain. These constraints, however, may be outranked in the second-cycle by more general constraints on markedness (general agreement markedness constraints), thereby favoring the default masculine form over the feminine.³⁹

In relation to the data presented in this article, corpus examples such as those in (11–12), repeated here as (26), illustrate that agreement with postnominal modifiers (highlighted in bold) consistently shows feminine morphology. As prefixes do not have gender features, the article's gender orientation cannot be determined.

(26) *Ese puesto colgaba del macroárea **liderada** por Ana María Bordas.*

'This post was held by the macro-area led by Ana María Bordas.'

*Le propusieron a Bush el desarrollo de un ciberarma **ultrasofisticada e inédita**.*

'They proposed to Bush the development of an ultra-sophisticated and unprecedented cyber-weapon.'

However, Rini (2016: 743) offers a counterargument to the "defeminization" hypothesis. He observes that nouns beginning with stressed /a/ may take masculine forms with prenominal modifiers yet still govern feminine forms of clitic pronouns, as shown in (27), drawn from the CREA corpus:⁴⁰

39. There may be empirical issues with this proposal that are not pertinent to our study. Firstly, variants such as *Esta playa tiene mucha mejor arena* 'This beach has much better sand' are attested (Fábregas & Pérez Jiménez 2008), where the adverb *mucho* gets unexpected feminine agreement in the prenominal position. Consequently, in this second cycle, a constraint rearrangement is required with regard to Bonet, Lloret & Mascaró's (2015) proposal, because the unmarked gender does not win. The second empirical problem concerns variants like *Viven en el mismo/la misma Zaragoza* (lit. They live in the same Zaragoza 'they live in Zaragoza capital'). A covariation phenomenon of determiner-modifier akin to that outlined in (25) is observed. However, it is evident that whether the nouns are stressed /a/ or not is inconsequential, as *Zaragoza* does not begin with a stressed /a/.
40. As one of the anonymous reviewers points out, as "defeminization" only concerns *Concord* relations (a PF phenomenon), binding relations between a pronoun and the DP could still be feminine, provided they are based on agreement (a syntactic phenomenon), although, as far as I know, the nature of binding is now on debate. Another matter, if we assume that D is a phase head, is that the DP has been spelled-out and transferred before or after the binding relation with the pronoun in the adjunct final sentence of (27). If the noun loses its feminine feature at PF, the pronoun will be feminine if binding is previous to the DP spell-out, and masculine if it is posterior to it. But I leave this question open to future research.

- (27) *No han podido absorber **todo el agua** para ir soltándola sobre los campos,*
 ‘They have not been able to absorb **all the water** and release it-(her) on the fields.’

Extending Rini’s argument, it should be noted that the /el/ allomorph used with nouns beginning with stressed /a/ need not correspond to the masculine article *el*. Consider the example in (28):

- (28) *He cortado el segundo tronco con el mismo hacha.*
 ‘I cut the second log with the same **axe**.’
 ‘I cut the second log with the same **ace**.’

The statement in (28) is ambiguous because, in the appropriate context, it can refer to both the tool and the person – so the first *with* prepositional phrase is instrumental, whereas the second is comitative. Interestingly, the only element that allows disambiguation of the reference is the article. To refer to the person, the interpretation of *el* must be that of the masculine article. Therefore, if speakers were to interpret the *el* of the tool also as masculine, they would not be able to disambiguate the example. In the analysis section, I will show that *el* only has masculine features when it spells-out a *Gender Phrase* to agree with a masculine noun, which does not happen in *el hacha* ‘the axe’.

Indeed, if we attempt to continue the example, the gender of the direct object (masculine *lo* for the person, feminine *la* for the tool) allows us to disambiguate (29):

- (29) *He cortado el segundo tronco con el mismo hacha*
 ... y **lo** he traído a casa (a cenar) → It can only refer to the person.
 ... ‘and I brought **him** home to dinner’
 ...y **la** he traído a casa (para guardarla) → It can only refer to the tool.
 ... ‘and I brought **it** home to store it’

A further argument against noun “defeminization” relates to diminutive formations. One might expect analogical expansions involving masculine diminutives, such as **Me he bebido todo el agüito* ‘I drank all the water’, where *water* is combined with a masculine diminutive). However, such forms are clearly ungrammatical.

Turning to diminutive suffixation, the existence of *el agüita* and *el amita* is documented and briefly analyzed by Harris (1987) as a case of “over-application”. According to Harris, the assignment of the allomorph /el/ occurs prior to cyclic stress reassignment (Harris 1987: 179), offering a simple and elegant explanation. However, Álvarez de Miranda (1993: 29) points out a difficulty: both *el agüita* and *la agüita* exhibit the same stress pattern, suggesting that stress reassignment alone cannot account for the observed variation.

Indeed, appealing to theories of adjunction offers a more satisfactory account, accommodating the sporadic and speaker-variable nature of the phenomenon. This variability is evident in the corpus example from ABC.es cited in (13), where both *el ciberaula* and *la ciberaula* appear, presumably authored by the same individual.

4. An approach based on adjunction

4.1. Prefixes and suffixes as adjuncts

Before arguing for the adjunct status of prefixes and suffixes used in the derivation of nouns beginning with stressed /a/ – which unexpectedly combine with the article forms /el/ and /un/ – we first list in (30) the relevant words involved in this variation:

- (30) a. *antiarma, ciberarma, ciberaula, ciberhabla, ecoaula, hiperaula, macroárea, microalga, superárea, superarma, teleaula*
 ‘anti-weapon, cyber-weapon, cyber-classroom, cyber-speech, eco-classroom, hyper-classroom, macro-area, micro-algae, super-area, super-weapon, tele-classroom’
- b. *agüica, agüilla, agüita, alita, almita, arquita, asita, aulita, avecilla, habllila, hachita*
 ‘little water, little wing, small ark, little ace, small hall, little bird, small talk, little axe’

Specifically, we need to justify why the prefixes *anti-*, *ciber-*, *eco-*, *hiper-*, *macro-*, *micro-*, *super-* and *tele-*, and the diminutive suffixes *-ica*, *-(c)illa*, and *-ita* can be considered adjuncts.

The first property justifying their adjunct status is that these affixes do not change the grammatical category of the base noun. In (31), we see that prefixes like *des-* and *in-*, which are not included in (30a), do change the category of nouns when attached. In contrast, the prefixes in (30a) preserve the nominal category.

- (31) *des* *agua* *ar* (*desaguar*)
 de- water-F Inf. 1st decl.
 ‘to drain’
- in* *arma* *e* (*inerme*)
 un- weapon-F ThV
 ‘unarmed’

Similarly, suffixes that change either the grammatical category (32a) or semantic class of a noun (32b) are shown in (32):

- (32) a. *armero* *acuoso* *aviar*
 weapon-ERO.M water-OSO.M bird-AR.Adj
 ‘armorer’ ‘watery’ ‘avian’
- b. *anclaje* *aulario* *algar*
 anchor-AJE.M hall-ARIO.M algae-AR.M
 ‘anchoring’ ‘lecture room’ ‘bunch of algae’

It is widely accepted that derivative suffixes determine the grammatical category or semantic class of words, and are therefore considered heads, taking their bases as complements in the syntax of the complex word (Lieber 1981). Similarly, some proposals differentiate between head prefixes and adjunct prefixes. Head prefixes exhibit properties similar to syntactic heads, such as restrictions on iteration and category combination, unlike adjunct prefixes, which typically allow both. Di Sciullo (1997a) argues for the head status of certain French prefixes, comparable to those illustrated in (31). Svenonius (2004) also identifies verbal prefixes in Slavic languages that show either head-like or adjunct-like properties. Head-like prefixes typically encode spatial or resultative meanings and can lexicalize with the verb, whereas adjunct prefixes tend to contribute quantificational meanings and behave compositionally. The prefixes classified here as adjuncts in (30a) share these properties. The example we found with *anti-* (*un antiarma biológica* ‘an anti-biological weapon’) illustrates the distribution of *anti-* as a modifier, since it denotes a class of weapons, rather than as a predicative head (*mi primo es un antiarmas* ‘my cousin is an anti-gunner’), which would not denote a weapon but rather a person who is against guns.

A second property that supports the adjunct status of prefixes and diminutive suffixes in variants that unexpectedly select /el/ and /un/ is their inability to change the gender of the base noun. This property is irrelevant for prefixes – since no Spanish prefix has the capacity to assign gender – but it is crucial in the case of suffixes. As Eguren (2001) proposes, *micro-* and *-it* in *microalga* and *alguita* are nearly identical in meaning. However, structurally, *-it* functions as a suffix, whereas *micro-* is a prefix. The difference lies in the presence of a gender feature in *-it*, absent in *micro-*, causing *-it* to validate the noun’s gender feature structurally.

In (33a), we observe appreciative suffixes changing the gender of feminine nouns beginning with stressed /a/, while in (33b), derivational suffixes effect similar changes:

- | | | | |
|---------|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| (33) a. | <i>arcón</i>
ark-AUM.M
‘chest’ | <i>anclote</i>
anchor-DIM.M
‘small anchor’ | |
| b. | <i>alero</i>
wing-ERO.M
‘eaves’ | <i>arquero</i>
ark-ER.M
‘cashier’ | <i>arpista</i>
harp-IST
‘harpist’ |

The nouns in (33) no longer accept /la/ and /una/ as determiners, having shifted gender due to suffixation: *arcón* and *anclote* have become masculine, *arquero*/*arquera* gender-variable, and *el/la arpista* gender-neutral.

In (34), nouns beginning with stressed /a/ (*arma*, *agua*, *aspa* and *alba*) combine with certain derivational suffixes. Although their gender remains feminine after derivation, they cannot combine with the allomorphs /el/ and /un/:

(34) <i>armería</i> ⁴¹	<i>aguada</i>	<i>aspadera</i>	<i>albada</i>
arm-ORY.F	water-ADA.F	asp-DERA.F	dawn-ADA-F
‘armory’	‘large amount of water’	‘hoe’	‘dawn’

The question arises: why is *un agüita* acceptable, but **un aguada* is not? I propose that selection of /el/ and /un/ is permitted only when the feminine gender is determined by the noun itself. When the affix, rather than the noun, determines the feminine gender – as in *aguada* – the selection of /el/ and /un/ is blocked. As is well-known, derivational suffixes independently assign gender (Ambadiang 1999: 4876). Thus, the derivatives in (34) are feminine because suffixes like *-ada*, *-dera*, and *-ería* determine their gender, not because they inherit it from a noun beginning with stressed /a/. In this respect, these derivatives resemble those in (33b), except that, in the latter, the suffixes determine non-feminine gender.

The head status of the appreciative suffixes in (33a) is further supported by their ability to alter the gender of their bases: augmentative *-ón* and diminutive *-ote* change the gender of feminine nouns. Conversely, the inability to change the gender of the noun is the second piece of evidence supporting the adjunct status of the diminutives found in (30b).

This analysis is grounded in the works of Fábregas (2013) and Vadella (2016). Fábregas proposes that diminutives that change gender, such as German *-chen* (e.g., *Hund* ‘dog’ and *Stunde* ‘hour’ becoming neuter *Hündchen*, *Stündchen*), behave as heads. Vadella, in turn, contrasts forms like *manito/manita* ‘small hand’ with the non-existent **manecito* (vs. *manecita*), arguing that *-cito* functions as a head and thus blocks the preservation of the base noun’s theme vowel. In contrast, adjunct suffix *-it* preserve the base theme vowel *-o* or replace it with the default vowel *-a*. The diminutives in (30b) behave as adjuncts according to this analysis: most, such as *agüita*, preserve the stem vowel *a* of *agua*; only *avecilla* ‘small bird’ makes the inherent feminine gender of *ave* explicit through the addition of *-a*.

Finally, a comparison between lexicalized nouns in (35a) and those in (35b) (from 30b) provides further support:

(35) a.	<i>aleta</i>	<i>hachuela</i>	<i>astilla</i>	→ * <i>el/un</i>
	wing-DIM.F	axe-DIM.F	horn-DIM.F	
	‘fin’	‘hatchet’	‘splinter’	
b.	<i>alita</i>	<i>hachita</i>	<i>astita</i>	→ <i>el/un</i>
	wing-DIM.F	axe-DIM.F	horn-DIM.F	
	‘small wing’	‘small axe’	‘small horn’	

The examples in (35a) differ markedly from those in (35b): the former are lexicalized entries listed in dictionaries, while the latter are non-lexicalized, compositional forms generated in syntax. We propose that lexicalization weakens the morphological connection between forms like *aleta*, *hachuela*, and *astilla* and their bases

41. There are in the corpus of Spanish NOW some cases of *el Armería* in reference to a hotel and to the football team Almería, therefore, they are not exceptions to what has been proposed.

(*ala*, *hacha*, *asta*), hindering, though not entirely eliminating, the availability of /el/ and /un/. Evidence for this comes from cases such as *un arqueta* ('a catch basin') and *el aureola* ('the halo'), where despite high lexicalization, the non-standard article forms appear, suggesting partial preservation of morphological complexity.

In contrast, *alita*, *hachita*, and *astita* are not lexicalized; they are fully compositional. During parsing, the stressed noun and the diminutive adjunct suffix are processed separately, preserving the noun's capacity to trigger /el/ and /un/. The same applies to the prefixed forms in (30a), which, being low-frequency and fully compositional, are not registered in the lexicon (e.g., *ciberhabla* 'cyber-speech'). Lexicalization would block /el/ and /un/: since *ciberhabla* begins with /θ/, only the feminine forms /la/ and /una/ could appear.

Other properties characterize affixes behaving as adjuncts – such as their ability to iterate or to combine with different categories – but these are not examined here due to the lack of registered examples. Nonetheless, well-formed words in Spanish like *superciberaula* 'super-cyber-classroom' and *agüitica* 'small-little water' illustrate the former property. For the latter, we refer to Varela & Martín García (1999: 5006) regarding prefixes, and Lázaro Mora (1999: 4650-4651) regarding diminutive suffixes.

4.2. Interim summary

In summary, three key properties support the adjunct status of affixes that do not block the selection of the masculine allomorphs /el/ and /un/ with nouns beginning with stressed /a/. First, such affixes do not alter the syntactic category of the base – otherwise, the resulting forms would no longer be nouns and could not combine with determiners. Second, they do not affect the gender of the base, a crucial factor in the distribution of article allomorphs. The ability to assign gender is characteristic of head affixes – both derivational and certain diminutives – and aligns with the behavior of the plural suffix, which lexicalizes the functional projection of Number. When a noun like *agua* combines with a syntactic head, whether a derivational suffix (*agua-da*) or an inflectional affix (*agua-s*), it obligatorily triggers the regular feminine allomorphs /la/ and /una/.

The core of the analysis, to be developed in the next section, is the following: while the reassignment to regular allomorphs is obligatory when the affix functions as a head, it is not required when the affix is an adjunct.

The third relevant property is that these affixed forms typically exhibit fully compositional meaning and are not stored as lexicalized units in the mental lexicon. This lack of lexicalization ensures that the noun remains accessible within the syntactic numeration, thereby allowing the availability of the masculine article forms /el/ and /un/.

4.3. The nature of adjuncts: towards a proposal for analysis

The key to the proposed analysis is the following: when a noun beginning with stressed /a/, such as *arma*, merges with syntactic heads, – whether inflectional

(*arma-s*) or derivational (*arm-ería*) –, it loses the ability to co-occur with the allomorphs /el/ and /un/, even though it remains feminine. The insertion of these heads triggers the obligatory reassignment of the default article allomorphs /la/ and /una/. In contrast, forms such as *armita* or *ciberarma* still permit the use of /el/ and /un/ because the suffix *-ita* and the prefix *ciber-* function as adjuncts. As such, they do not necessitate the reassignment of article allomorphs, allowing those selected by the base noun to be retained.

Adopting a cartographic approach to the nominal phrase, adapted to word syntax from a nanosyntactic framework (Marqueta 2019), Figure 1 illustrates how the reassignment of article allomorphs takes place in the structure of *las armas*.

Following Bonet, Lloret & Mascaró (2015), I propose that the distribution of the /el-un/ allomorphs is conditioned by information encoded in the lexical entry, specifically associated with roots beginning with stressed /a/. This information becomes relevant only when the root is categorized as a noun. I thus suggest that it is activated when an (initially uncategorized) root is merged as the complement of a Classifier head (*Clas*) (Fábregas & Pérez Jiménez 2008), equivalent to Borer's (2005) *DivP*. Classifier constitutes the lowest nominal projection, always subordinated to Number (*Num*), and it encodes critical grammatical properties of the noun, such as countability and arbitrary gender. Accordingly, the selection of /el/ and /un/ allomorphs – no longer phonetically determined, as shown in Section 1 – must occur at this level, although the actual spell-out of articles is delayed until the Determiner head (*D*) is introduced.

In Figure 1, the interrupted arrows marked with a red X indicate that the Determiner projection cannot be lexicalized by the allomorphs conditioned by Classifier (/el/ and /un/), because an intervening functional head, *Number*, introduces its own morphological exponent *-s*. The allomorphs conditioned at Classifier (/el/ and /un/), which lack plural features, cannot lexicalize the Number projection (**el armas*), whereas a form like /las/ can simultaneously lexicalize both Gender (represented schematically by the dots) and Number.

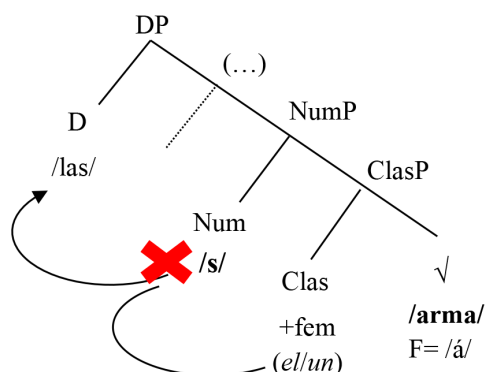


Figure 1. Simplified syntactic structure of the phrase *las armas*

At this point, it is necessary to make a brief clarification regarding our syntactic assumptions about gender. Following Fábregas & Pérez Jiménez (2010), we assume that gender can be encoded in two distinct syntactic projections: Classifier and Gender. Classifier is the lower head and encodes arbitrary gender, and, as we propose here, it can also encode arbitrary allomorphy, such as the /el/ and /un/ forms for feminine nouns beginning with stressed /a/. In contrast, the higher Gender projection determines the gender of the referent at the DP level. Gender can override the features established at Classifier, as evidenced by agreement phenomena such as *Soy toda oídos*. Here, *toda* ‘all’ appears in the feminine form because it agrees with the female speaker, whereas *oídos* ‘ears’ has masculine arbitrary gender.⁴² Evidently, if gender were solely determined by Classifier, the DP *toda oídos* would have to be masculine; however, the higher Gender projection overwrites the information inherited from the lexical entry.

Let us now consider the projection of *armita* or *ciberarma*. In these cases, instead of the *Number* projection (-s), the noun merges with either a diminutive suffix (-it) or a prefix (*ciber-*). Since both elements have been analyzed as syntactic adjuncts, their presence does not alter the categorial nature of the projection, which remains a Classifier Phrase. However, the syntactic representation must account for two distinct derivational outcomes, illustrated in Figures 2 and 3.⁴³

In the first configuration, the adjunct (represented in the figures simply as *Adj*) behaves similarly to the head in Figure 1: it intervenes in the syntactic structure,

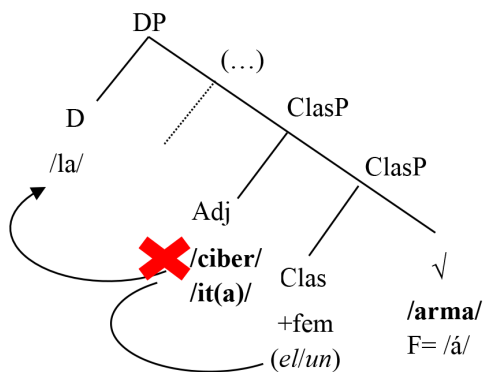


Figure 2. Simplified syntactic projection of the phrases *la armita* / *la ciberarma*

42. This can be demonstrated by forming the diminutive in the expression *Soy toda oídos*, where *oídos* retains the masculine vowel marker even after the addition of the diminutive suffix -it.

43. As the morphological behavior of the diminutive suffix in relation to the theme vowel -a is not the focus of this analysis, we will not address it in detail here. For competing but compatible accounts of this interaction, we refer the reader to prior work on the topic (Eguren 2001; Fábregas 2013; Vadella 2016), which offer alternative theoretical explanations consistent with the model developed in this study.

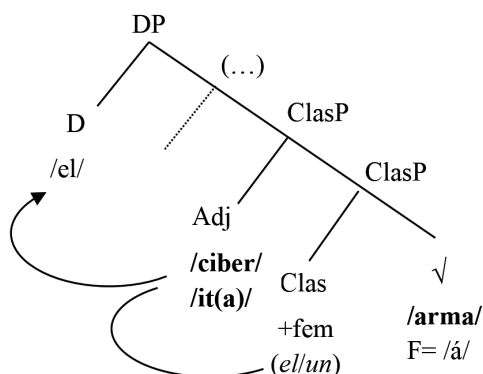


Figure 3. Simplified syntactic projection of the phrases *el armita* / *el ciberarma* (to be revised)

triggering the reassignment of the default article allomorph. Figure 3, by contrast, represents a different situation: here, the adjunct is merged with the Classifier Phrase but does not intervene in the relevant derivational domain, and as a result, the reassignment of the article allomorph does not occur. (Note that Figure 3 is provisional and will be revised in Figure 4.) The key question is how to explain the contrast between the phrases *la armita* / *la ciberarma* and *el armita* / *el ciberarma*.

Observations on the peculiar syntactic behavior of adjuncts have led several authors to propose that adjuncts combine in a fundamentally different way from other syntactic constituents (such as arguments, heads, or specifiers). Two theoretical proposals are particularly relevant for our purposes.⁴⁴

The first is the idea that adjuncts can be spelled out in a separate domain and later reintegrated into the main syntactic structure for semantic interpretation before being transferred to the interfaces (Uriagereka 1999; see also Fábregas 2013, who adapts this idea to morphological adjuncts). This mechanism accounts for the ability of adjuncts to disrupt contiguity between article and noun, as their phonological material is spelled out independently and thus does not count for materialization purposes. However, this analysis does not explain why, in the majority of cases, the article allomorph is reassigned to the standard form.

The second proposal, more relevant for our analysis, is that adjuncts may be inserted into the derivation at a later stage, non-cyclically (unlike heads). While more radical approaches argue for obligatory late adjunction (Stepanov 2001),

44. Here I have focused solely on justifying the adjunct status of the studied affixes, but there is an extensive literature on this topic. It is worth noting that adjuncts exhibit several properties, including but not limited to: (i) rarely permitting extraction of material from their phrases (Huang 1982, but see counterexamples in Truswell 2011: 129); (ii) not being selected (Chomsky 2004); (iii) not necessarily causing violations of binding or “reconstruction effects” (Lebeaux 1988); (iv) often forming their own prosodic constituents. Additionally, I am assuming that certain diminutive suffixes and prefixes, because of sharing their status as adjuncts, occupy the same syntactic position. However, we must keep in mind that they are linearized differently. In that regard, see Eguren (2001).

more recent accounts (Sportiche 2019) maintain that late adjunction is merely optional, potentially triggered by the presence of phase heads or the absence of uninterpretable features (Zyman 2022; Dal Farra 2020). In line with Sportiche's optionality hypothesis, this paper adopts the view that late adjunction can occur, but need not always.

One well-known application of the late adjunction hypothesis to a case of adjunct allomorphy is Newell's (2004) analysis of *unhappier*, a classic example of bracketing paradox. Semantically, the prefix *un-* must first combine with *happy* (*unhappier* = 'more unhappy', not 'not more happy'), but phonologically, if *un-* is already present when the comparative *-er* is added, it creates a trisyllabic base that blocks the synthetic comparative (forcing *more unhappy* instead). Newell resolves this paradox by positing that *un-* is merged after *happier* is spelled out, yet retains its expected semantic scope.

A similar mechanism can be invoked to account for the non-standard variants *el ciberarma* and *el armita*. To capture these cases, Figure 3 must be revised – since it mirrors the configuration in Figure 2 and therefore cannot represent an alternate derivation. The revised structure, shown in Figure 4, assumes that the adjunct is late-inserted after the Classifier projection, thereby allowing the original article allomorphs /el/ and /un/ to be retained.

Following the hypothesis proposed by Newell (2004), the representation in Figure 4 assumes that no element intervenes in the joint phonological realization of the noun and its article. The attachment of the adjunct may be delayed until just before the phase is transferred – assuming, as Svenonius (2004) proposes, that D constitutes a phase. If adjunction occurs at this point in the derivation, it does not interfere with the selection of the article allomorph, thereby allowing the retention of /el/ and /un/. In contrast, if the adjunct is introduced at a lower stage of the derivation, prior to the merge of the D head – as illustrated in Figure 2 – it disrupts the contiguity between the noun and its article, resulting in the obligatory reassignment to the default allomorphs /la/ and /una/.

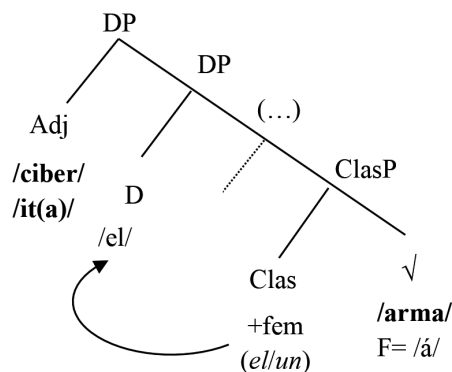


Figure 4. Simplified syntactic projection of the phrases *el armita* / *el ciberarma*

Support for the validity of the configuration represented in Figure 4 comes from analogous constructions in Spanish morphology, where affixal elements exhibit similar behavior, albeit in restricted contexts. Consider forms such as *cariñosísimamente*, where the suffix *-ísima* is phonologically integrated with the base adjective *cariñoso* ‘loving’, yet semantically scopes over the entire expression, meaning ‘very lovingly’. Similarly, phrases like *te quierito* ‘lit. I small-love you’, frequently attested in colloquial Spanish, display a comparable structure to *el agüita*: the proclitic *te* and the diminutive *-ita* attach to the verb base *quiero*, although the diminutive semantically modifies the entire utterance *te quiero*.

These cases suggest that the adjunct need not intervene in the syntactic relationship between the article and the noun, as its ultimate phonological position may be determined only at the point of linearization. This supports the view that the syntactic timing of adjunct insertion is flexible and may influence morphophonological outcomes.

5. Final remarks

This article has examined a previously underexplored variation in article selection with feminine nouns that begin with stressed /a/, focusing on cases of apparent non-compliance with regular allomorph distribution, such as *el ciberarma* or *el armita*. These instances fall outside the generalization that article reassignment is driven by phonological factors or analogical reinterpretation of gender. Instead, I have proposed a configurational explanation that can unify both contiguity-sensitive and prosodically-conditioned non-standard variants under a single syntactic model.

Nouns beginning with stressed /a/ are lexically specified to choose certain article variants, similar to how they can be linked to other arbitrary information crucial for their syntactic projection, such as gender in all inanimate nouns or their count/uncount nature. This all occurs within the same projection, Classifier, the lowest head in the nominal domain. It has been proposed that the intervention of any material between the Classifier head and the Determiner is what causes, at a point in the derivation of the DP, the inability to spell-out the variant linked to the Classifier. The intervention of material is a common occurrence in phrase projections: the mere appearance of the plural affix, or of any derivative suffix, is enough to trigger the selection of the default forms /la/ and /una/. This process of reassignment is parallel to that which occurs when the diminutive of the word *mano* is formed with the standard theme vowel /a/, resulting in *manecilla* or *manita*, rather than retaining the vowel of the base noun, as in the less common variant *manito*. In fact, the characteristic of adjuncts is that they often, but not necessarily, trigger a reassignment, since they can be late-inserted in the derivation.

An explanation for the variation in the assignment of allomorphs, based on the hypothesis that the allomorphs /el/ and /un/ provided in the Classifier head can be replaced by the allomorphs /la/ and /una/ at later stages, opens the door to the possibility of unifying all the variation around a single explanation, which is always methodologically desirable. I am referring to the phenomena discussed in (7): for nouns such as *árbitro*, *Ana*, *hache*, *Alfa Romeo*, or *Ámsterdam*, although

they begin with a stressed /a/, the articles *la* and *una* are necessarily or frequently used instead of /el/ and /un/.

RAE & ASALE's (2009: §14.2l; §15.1f) account for cases like *la árbitro* 'the woman referee' by appealing to the speakers' need to distinguish the gender of the referent, but the same need could be argued for in other historical periods where masculine articles could appear.⁴⁵ Leonetti (1999: 790), on the other hand, suggests that the use of the feminine articles is determined by the gender of the referent or the hyperonym.

In the model presented here, it is possible to configure the reassignment of default allomorphs for nouns like *árbitro* at a specific point in the syntactic derivation. This point is located in the syntactic projection of the Gender Phrase. Fábregas & Pérez Jiménez (2010) show how these two distinct projections explain discrepancies such as those exemplified by *este rata* (lit. 'this rat' meaning 'thas stingy man'). The feminine gender of *rata* is encoded in the Classifier, as it is inherent to the noun, while its masculine gender is encoded in the Gender Phrase, the higher projection, responsible for the reference of the DP (in this case, to a male referent).

According to this analysis, the use of /la/ with nouns like *la árbitro* 'the woman referee' and *la ama de llaves* 'the housekeeper' can be attributed to the reassignment of the article in the Gender projection. The same explanation can account for cases like *la hache* 'the letter H' and *la Ámsterdam de 1686* '1686 Amsterdam', where gender information appears to be derived from the feminine hyperonyms "letter" and "city". Finally, to explain why *la Ana* or *la Álvarez* are possible, the hypothesis that proper names lack a *Classifier* projection may warrant further investigation. This question remains open for future research.

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45. Note that this replacement did not necessarily occur when the phenomenon was phonetically conditioned. Álvarez de Miranda (1993: 23) documents forms such as *el almirantesa* and *el abadesa*.

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