Morphosyntax of Indefinite Markers

In the analysis, I will present a fine-grained representation of the structure of indefinite markers, which appear as a part of existential indefinite pronouns (e.g. English *some-*, as in *something* or *somebody*). I will show that morphemes of this type are cross-linguistically derived on the basis of a single universal sequence of syntactic features:

(1)

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                    CP
            /                \
   Non-specific               BP
                        /            \
              Specific-unknown        AP
                                  /        \
                        Specific-familiar   XP
                                            /\
                                           /__\
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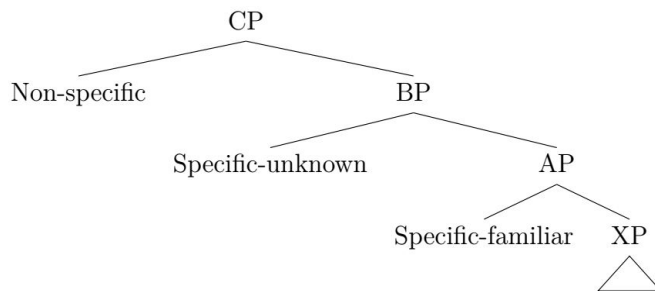
As shown in works such as Haspelmath 1997, it is possible to distinguish three subtypes of existential indefinite markers with the following meanings:

(2)
a. specific familiar markers- the referent is a particular entity whose identity is known to the speaker
b. specific unknown markers - the referent is a particular entity whose identity is not known to the speaker
c. non-specific markers - the referent is not a particular entity

In English, the difference between the subtypes shown in (2) is not morphologically marked:

(3)
a. I have *something* to tell you (specific-familiar meaning).
b. There is *someone* in the bathroom (specific-unknown meaning).
c. Bring me *something* to eat (non-specific meaning).

However, the difference is clearly morphologically marked in Russian with three separate markers: *koe-*, *-to* and *-nibud* (Eremina 2012: 9-10):
(4)
a. Ja nashla koe-chto interesnoje v etoj knige.
I found something (KOE) interesting in this book
I saw something interesting in this book (I know exactly what it is and I may tell you later but at this point I don't what to specify anything).
b. Masha prigotovit chto-to v kusnoje na uzhin.
Masha cook-FUT something (TO) delicious for dinner.
Masha will cook something delicious for dinner (and she knows what it is going to be, but the speaker does not).
c. Masha prigotovit chto-nibud' v kusnoje na uzhin.
Masha cook-FUT something (NIBUD) delicious for dinner.
Masha will cook something delicious for dinner (we don't know what it is going to be and we don't know whether Masha has decided either).

As it can be seen, in English, existential indefinite markers are fully syncretic, while there is no syncretism in Russian. Syncretism, understood as "a surface conflation of two distinct morphosyntactic structures" (Caha 2009: 6), can be used to establish the internal hierarchy for a paradigm of related forms. Items included in such a paradigm will constitute phonological exponents spelled out for subsets of a syntactic hierarchy:

Table 1.

Language:	Russian	English	Polish	Latin	Yakut
Pattern:	ABC	AAA	AAA	ABB	AAB
Specific-familiar	koe-kto	some-one	kto-ś	qui-dam	kim ere
Specific-unfamiliar	kto-to	some-one	kto-ś	ali-quis	kim ere
Non-specific	kto-nibud	some-one	kto-ś	ali-quis	kim eme

As observed in Bobaljik (2007), syncretism may target only adjacent items in a paradigm and subsequently only adjacent features in a sequence. As a result, ABA patterns should never occur in a correct paradigm (*ABA generalization). The lack of such patterns is clearly seen in a cross-linguistic comparison of existential-indefinite-marker paradigms. In the analysis of over 30 languages, the ABA patter has not been attested.

However, syncretism alone reveals only the relative order of elements in the sequence since both containment options are possible ([[[A]B]C] and [[[C]B]A]). To find the first feature in the hierarchy, one has to consider morphological containment (indefinite markers in bold):

(5) German 'somebody'
a. **je**-mand - specific-unknown form
b. **irgend-je**-mand - non-specific form

As seen above, a non-specific indefinite marker may contain a specific-unknown one. This reveals that non-specific markers are morphologically more complex and thus establishes the position of the non-specific feature as the last one in the sequence. This supports the order of indefinite-marker features shown in (1).

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