Non-definiteness vs. specificity – The pragmatics of indefiniteness marking in Classical Armenian

Classical Armenian possesses a range of formal means being used to realize semantic or pragmatic indefiniteness of noun phrases (NP’s): the adnominal indefinites *omn* and *ok*, the adnominal numeral *mi* ‘one’, and the indefinite *inc* ‘something, somehow’. Nevertheless, from a random sample of 100 indefinites from the Armenian New Testament, more than the half are zero-marked “bare” NP’s without any indefinite determiner. A direct comparison with the translational prototypes, the Syriac and Greek New Testament, shows that indefiniteness marking in Classical Armenian obviously follows independent rules.

The seeming optionality of indefiniteness marking in Armenian becomes more transparent by taking a semantic specificity distinction into account which has been suggested for the ambiguity of indefinite NP’s in English. For Classical Armenian this can be illustrated by two contrastive examples (indefinites in object position):

1) *Aył zinč’* el-ēk’ tesanel; Ø- ayr ʻi handerj-s p’ap’kowt’-e an zardareal?
   ‘But what did you go out to see? A man, adorned with soft clothes?’ (Lk 7:25)

2) *Ew aha ark’ ber-ein mahč-awk’ z- ayr mĩ or ēr andamaloyc.*
   and see man:pl carry-3pl:ipf bed-inst:pl dom-man indef rel be:3sg:ipf paralytic
   ‘And see, (some) men carried on a bed a man who was paralytic.’ (Lk 5:18)

The context of (1) suggests a non-specific reading: the reference of the indefinite NP is understood to represent any possible value of the NP’s extension (‘any man’), and the object NP is thus zero-marked. The NP in (2), in contrast, introduces a new discourse referent which is epistemically specific (known to the narrator) and later in the text picked up by anaphoric references. Consequently, the object NP is determined by the postponed indefiniteness marker *mi* ‘one’ and additionally by the differential object marker *z-*.

In this paper I will show in how far the specificity approach suits to explain the seeming optionality of indefiniteness marking in Classical Armenian and where modification or different attempts are required. I will also address the semantics of the various indefinite determiners and the distribution of *omn* and *ok* which are often claimed to represent a similar positive/negative and (anti)free-choice polarity as reflected in English *some/any* or Russian *kogo-to/kogo-nibud’*. 