

(In)definiteness in natural languages

Day 1

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EGG Summer School 2022

An overview

- ① Definiteness in natural languages
- ② Indefiniteness in natural languages
- ③ Special focus on languages without articles

What is definiteness?

- What kind of category is it?
- What are the concepts behind it?
- How is it expressed in natural language(s)?

Definiteness as a linguistic category

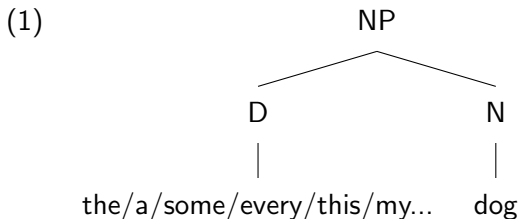
Definiteness may be conceived as

- a morphosyntactic category
- a semantic / semantico-pragmatic category

Do they necessarily correspond to each other? Are they necessarily present in all languages?

Definiteness as a morphosyntactic category

- a binary grammatical category [\pm definite] (first introduced in Chomsky (1965) that characterises a structural position D)
- usually discussed w.r.t. articles



- (2)
- a. **The dog** is barking outside.
 - b. **A dog** is barking outside.
 - c. ***Dog** is barking outside.

Definiteness as a morphosyntactic category

DISCLAIMER:

I am not entering an NP/DP debate here. For more details read:
Alexiadou, A., Haegeman, L. & Stavrou, M. 2007. Noun phrase in generative perspective. Berlin: de Gruyter.

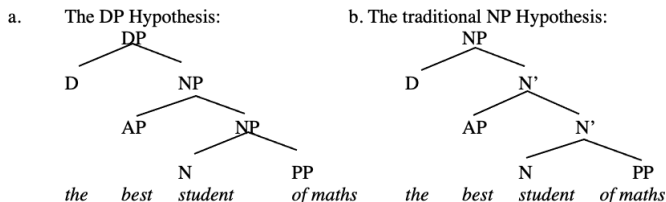


Figure 1: McIntyre (2014: 34, 121)

Definiteness as a morphosyntactic category

Articles are (generally) obligatory with singular count nouns in languages with articles.

Pre-theoretically: The definite article indicates that the speaker is referring to a particular object, not just any.

Does the category of definiteness exist in languages without articles?

(3) Ukrainian

Sobaka havkaje nadvori.
dog barks outside

‘The/A dog barks/is barking outside.’

Articles from a typological perspective

Half of the world languages do not have an article system (Lyons 1999, Longobardi 2001, i.a.)

Typology of article systems (Dryer 2013, WALS)

Table 1: Definiteness marking

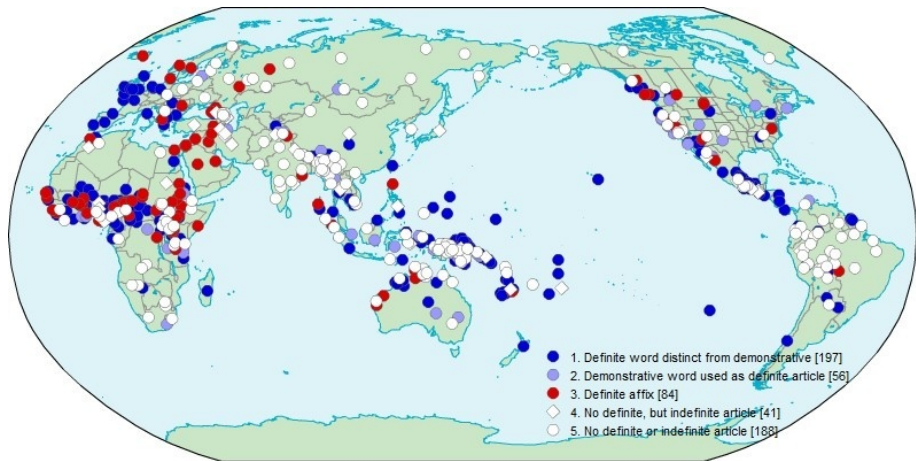
620	languages in the sample
216	have a specialized definite lexical element
92	have a definite affix on a noun
69	use demonstratives as definite articles
45	lack a def. article but have an indef. one
198	have no def. or indef. article

Articles from a typological perspective

Table 2: Indefiniteness marking

534	languages in the sample
102	have a specialized indefinite lexical element
24	have an indefinite affix on a noun
112	use numeral 'one' as the indefinite article
98	lack an indef. article but have a def. one
198	have no def. or indef. article

WALS maps of definiteness systems



Typological differences (some examples)

Only definite article

- ▶ Often the definite article originates from a demonstrative

- Irish

an bord 'the table'

bord 'a table'

- Classical Greek (but not Modern Greek)

to dendron 'the tree'

dendron 'a tree' Only indefinite article (less common in languages)

Typological differences (some examples)

- ▶ Often the indefinite article is close or identical to the numeral *one*
- Turkish
 - ev 'house', 'the house'
 - bir** ev 'a house'
- Mam (a Mayan language, 600K speakers in Guatemala)
 - xiinaq 'man', 'the man'
- **jun** xiinaq 'a man'

Typological differences (some examples)

Both definite and indefinite articles

- ▶ Maybe pre- or postpositional

- Romanian

bărbatul 'the man'

un bărbat 'a man'

- Swedish

en resa 'a trip'

resan 'the trip'

en lång resa 'a long trip'

den långa resan 'the long trip'

- ▶ Polydefinites

- Modern Greek (colloquial)

to xílino to trapézi 'the wooden table', lit. 'the wooden the table'

Typological differences (some examples)

Some controversial cases: Does the indefinite article exist in Macedonian?

- Macedonian

- (4) a. Kučeto lae nadvor.
dog.the barks outside
- b. Kuče lae nadvor.
dog barks outside
- c. **Edno** kuče lae nadvor.
one/a dog barks outside

Typological differences (some examples)

The articles does not only express a definite or indefinite reference, but also in some languages:

- Number and gender

Spanish:

el chico.M.SG - **la** chica.F.SG - **los** chicos.M.PL - **las** chicas.F.PL

- Case/syntactic role

Bulgarian:

- (5) a. Telefon**ǎt** e na masata.
phone.the.NOM is on table.the
“The phone is on the table.”
- b. Viždam telefona.
I.see phone.the.ACC
“I see the phone.”

Typological differences (some examples)

- Animacy, countability, givenness in discourse...

BUT: All articles introduce domain restriction (Gillon 2015), i.e. a variable that restricts the set of individuals that match the NP description to those within the context of the discourse (Westerstahl 1985; von Stechow 1994, i.a.)

Other types of definite NPs

- Proper names

(6) Ukrainian

Patron havkaje nadvori.

Patron barks outside

'Patron is barking outside.'

BUT:

(7) Catalan

El Patron està bordant a fora.

the Patron is barking outside.



Other types of definite NPs

- Possessives

(8) Ukrainian

Mij sobaka havkaje nadvori.
my dog barks outside

'My dog is barking outside.'

BUT:

(9) a. Catalan

El meu gos està bordant a fora.
the my dog is barking outside.

b. Greek

O skílos **mou** gavgízi éxo.
the dog my barks outside.

Other types of definite NPs

- Demonstrative

(10) Ukrainian

Cej sobaka havkaje nadvori.
this dog barks outside

'**This** dog is barking outside.'

BUT:

(11) Greek

Aftós o skílos gavgízi éxo.
this the dog barks outside

Other types of definite NPs

- Referring pronouns

(12) Ukrainian

Vin havkaje nadvori.
he barks outside

'He/It is barking outside.'

- ▶ Definiteness (as a semantic phenomenon) is not the same as the meaning of the definite article.

Definiteness as a semantic category

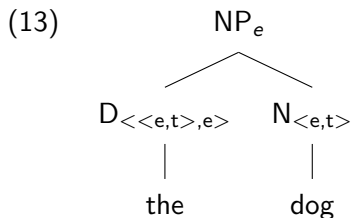
Is definiteness universal?

- The distinction between a definite and an indefinite reference is an important element of human communication, thus, it could be expected to be universally present in natural languages (Cummins 1998, Lyons 1999, i.a.)
- "[...]we can safely assume that all languages are capable of making definite reference and that, therefore, there must be a way in every language to refer to particular individuals which are assumed to be known to speaker and hearer, or which are assumed to be unique in the relevant context of a speech-act, **the task is to determine how they do it and which other semantic phenomena are associated with definiteness marking.**" (Aguilar-Guevara et al. 2019)

The definite article

Most widely adopted assumptions:

- ▶ Common nouns are predicates and denote sets of individuals.
- ▶ The definite article *the* denotes a function from predicates (type $\langle e,t \rangle$) to individuals (type e) (Frege 1879; Elbourne 2005, 2013; Heim 2011, i.a.).
- ▶ As a result the whole NP denotes (refers to) an individual.



Semantic types (a quick review)

Linguistic expressions are classified into their semantic types according to the kind of denotation they have.

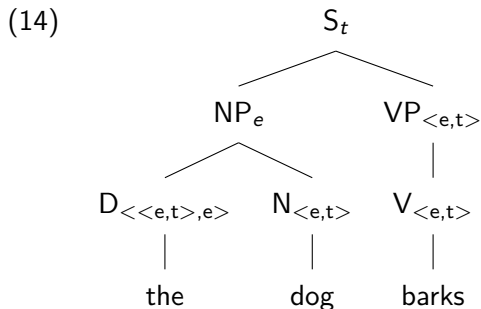
Basic types:

- e is the type of expressions denoting individuals
- t is the type of expressions denoting truth values (True, False, Undefined)

Complex types:

- $\langle \sigma, \tau \rangle$ the type of expressions denoting functions. They are constructed from simple ones.

Semantic types (a quick review)



The sentence in (14) is true iff the individual x that is a dog barks.

- ▶ Expressions of type e are used as arguments (subjects and objects).
- ▶ Predicates are functions that relates (sets of) arguments and truth values.

Main uses of the definite article

Core types of definites:

- Anaphoric. The def. NP refers to a referent introduced in the preceding discourse.
- Situational. The def. NP refers to a referent that is the only one that satisfies the description in a certain situation.

Examples from Šimík (2014):

- (15) a. Context: I met **a likeable school director** at the educational congress.
The director invited me for a coffee.
- b. Situation: *I'm a teacher at a school, talking to a colleague of mine.*
The director invited me for a coffee.

Main uses of the definite article

- (16) a. Context: The newly discovered planet has **an interesting moon**.
The moon might harbor primitive life.
- b. Situation: *Here on Earth, an optimist speaking...*
The moon might harbor primitive life.

NB: In Czech (a language without articles), there is a strong tendency to use the demonstrative in the anaphoric function and a bare nominal in the situational function.

- (17) a. Context: Ta nově objevená planeta má **zajímavý měsíc**.
Na **tom měsíci** / # **měsíci** by mohl být primitivní život.
- b. Situation: *Tady na zemi, mluví optimista...*
Na **měsíci** / # **tom měsíci** by mohl být primitivní život.

Main uses of the definite article

Other types:

- Deixis/ostension. In some languages an NP preceded by a def. article (not a demonstrative) can be used.

(18) a. German (only with 'strong' articles (Schwarz 2009))

Ich suche in **dem**₁ **Haus** und du suchst in **dem**₂ **Haus**.
I search in the house and you search in the house
/ # im Haus.

'I'll be searching in that house and you'll be searching in that house.'

- b. # I'll be searching in **the house** and you'll be searching in **the house**.

Main uses of the definite article

Example from Robinson (2005)

(19) Context: Two friends touring the countryside enter a new village, and head to the town square, where they find a baobab tree. In the baobab is sitting a monkey. One friend says to the other:

a. **The** monkey is giving you a funny look!

b. French

#**Le** singe te regarde d'un drôle œil.
the.SG.M monkey you watch of.INDEF.SG.M funny eye

c. **Ce** singe te regarde d'un drôle œil.
DEM.SG.M monkey you watch of.INDEF.SG.M funny eye

'That monkey is giving you a funny look.'

Main uses of the definite article

- Bridging (Clark 1975; Asher & Lascarides 1998), also called *associative anaphora* (Hawkins 1978) or *inferrable definites* (Prince 1981). The linguistic context only introduces a situation, which (by means of world knowledge) supplies a single referent for the definite.

(20) I had to get a taxi from the station. On the way **the driver** told me there was a bus strike.

(21) They've just got in from New York. **The plane** was five hours late.

NB: If the situation does not supply a single referent, the use of a def. NP is infelicitous.

(22) Context: Mary was driving down the street.
#**The** wheel / A wheel / One (of the) wheel(s) was making a strange noise.

Main uses of the definite article

- Ontologically unique entities (the uniqueness interpretation depends on the world knowledge)

(23) **The** moon was very bright last night.

- Kind / generic terms. They refer to the whole class of individuals or to concepts (Carlson 1977, Chierchia 1998, i.a.).

(24) a. **The** dodo is extinct.

b. **The** bird evolved from the dinosaur.

But not in plural:

(25) a. (***The**) dodos are extincts.

b. (***The**) birds evolved from (***the**) dinosaurs.

Main uses of the definite article

However, in Spanish (see Borik & Espinal 2015):

- (26) a. **El** dodo está extinguido.
the.M.SG dodo is extinct
- b. ***(Los)** dodos están extinguidos.
the.M.PL dodos are extinct
- c. **El** pájaro evolucionó **del** dinosaurio.
the bird evolved from.the.m.sg dinosaur
- d. ***(Los)** pájaros evolucionaron de ***(los)** dinosaurios.
the.m.pl birds evolved from the.m.pl dinosaurs

Main uses of the definite article

How about German? (Examples from Schaden (2012)):

- (27) a. **(Die)** Wale sind Säugetiere.
the.PL whales are mammals
'Whales are mammals.'
- b. **(Die)** Dinosaurier sind ausgestorben.
the.PL dinosaurs are extinct
'Dinosaurs are extinct.'

Main uses of the definite article

For abstract and mass nouns: bare in English vs. definite in Romance

(28) Linguistics is the scientific study of natural language.

(29) Catalan

La lingüística és l'estudi científic del
the.F.SG linguistics is the.study scientific of.the.M.SG
llenguatge natural.
language natural

Main uses of the definite article

- Weak definites. There is no requirement for there to be a single referent of the def. NP.

(30) I was listening to **the radio**.

(31) Please take **the elevator** to the second floor.

Notice: There are also predicative uses of definite NPs.

(32) John is tall, handsome, and **the love of my life**.

Theoretical perspective

Definite articles in various languages are used differently

- Does the definite article (e.g., *the* in English and *el* in Spanish) have different meanings?
- Or is it the same article and the differences follow from some other theoretical principles?
- ▶ Is it the same semantic operator can be lexicalized in some languages and not lexicalized in others?