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Andrew Chesterman
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1 *Introduction*

1.1 The realization of definiteness

The general structure and purpose of this study is Popperian. The starting-point is neither a corpus of data nor a particular theoretical position, but a problem, or rather a set of problems. My basic strategy is first to describe the problems, then consider the solutions that have been proposed to date. I then try to show in what respects these solutions are inadequate, how they neglect or misinterpret certain kinds of data and finally suggest my own analysis. In Popper's terms I thus proceed from Problem to Hypothesis to Test to New Hypothesis (see Popper 1972). It then remains to be seen what new problems and further, more refined, hypotheses will follow from where this study leaves off.

The general issue is: what is definiteness? This is first of all a semantic, conceptual question: what does the term 'definiteness' mean? Consequently, and more specifically, we may ask: what does it mean to say that something is definite or indefinite?

A second level of discussion then has to do with recognition: given a definition of definiteness, definite and indefinite, how do we actually recognize that something is definite or not? This is a matter of realization, in two senses of the word. In linguistic terms, how is definiteness realized, i.e. expressed? And in psycholinguistic terms, how does the hearer/reader realize, or infer, that something is definite or not? In other words, what needs to be examined is both how definiteness is encoded and how it is decoded.

In outline, the main arguments are as follows. I shall claim that definiteness is not a semantic primitive but a cover-term comprising a number of oppositions which are more basic. This componential analysis of definiteness shows that 'definite' and 'indefinite' are not merely polar opposites, but qualitatively different concepts. Definiteness is not binary, but composite; it is also scalar.

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I start with an analysis of the English articles, as prototypical realizations of definiteness. I argue that the English article system consists of five terms: *the*, *a* and unstressed *some*, as 'surface articles', plus two 'no article' categories: zero (indefinite, with mass and plural) and null (definite, with singular proper nouns and some singular count nouns). Each of these five terms imposes a distinct meaning on the NP. As expressed in the English articles, definiteness can be analysed as a matrix of three binary features, which suffice to distinguish the five articles: **locatability** in a shared set (having to do with familiarity), **inclusiveness** (quantity), and **extensivity** (abstractness and generality). The first two features are adapted from Hawkins' location theory, and the third is based on Guillaume's analysis of the difference between any surface article and no surface article. The description proposed is then placed in an informal set-theoretical framework. It is general enough to account for both referentials and non-referentials, and also incorporates a theory of genericness as a non-uniform derived reading.

In order to examine the implications of this analysis for languages which lack articles I then turn to Finnish, a language which has a very different structure. Here, definiteness is expressed or inferred in a variety of ways, via indications either of familiarity or of quantity. The various methods constitute a hierarchy: inferences based on word order can be overruled by the use of article-like function words or by certain case-endings, but the predominant factor is context.

These detailed treatments of English and Finnish are then followed by briefer references to studies of a number of other languages, which appear to corroborate my general conclusions.

The arguments about the nature of definiteness are also of relevance to some aspects of linguistic theory in general: the applicability (or otherwise) of standard logic in linguistic analysis; the relation between grammar and pragmatics; fuzzy grammar and prototype theory. I conclude with the suggestion that linguistics needs a non-Aristotelian paradigm to cope with fuzzy concepts such as definiteness.

1.2 The theoretical problems

We start, then, with the question: what is definiteness? Something of the nature of this problem is illustrated by the following definition by Kramsky (1972: 30) of what he calls 'determinedness': 'By the term "determinedness" we understand the fact that nouns are classified

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according to whether the content expressed by the noun is clear and identifiable in a concrete way or not. In topical utterances [*sic*] this category is realized in the positive case by "determinedness", in the negative case by "indeterminedness".' Definitions of this kind are not helpful. Krámský evidently means that *nouns* are either determined or undetermined in this way, but this does not amount to a definition of definiteness or determinedness as such. Furthermore, his definition is couched in terms that are themselves undefined. To say, for instance, that a determined noun is one that is 'identifiable' is circular: it begs the question of precisely what is meant by 'identifiable'. 'In a concrete way' does not take us any closer – how would this be distinguished from an 'abstract' way? And what is meant by 'clear'? Is it really the *content* that must be 'clear' in order for a noun to be determined? Precisely what is the category that is 'realized by determinedness'? Is it not determinedness itself which is the category in need of a definition? Indeed, in what sense does it constitute a 'category' (whether universal or not) in the first place?

Related to this central question of definiteness are a number of other issues which will also receive attention. One of these will obviously be reference, which has traditionally posed a labyrinth of problems; however, one of my points will be that definiteness cannot be restricted to matters of reference alone. It will also become clear that reference, like definiteness, is difficult to conceive of in any simple, unitary sense; rather, the term has a wide and varied scope.

Another related problem concept is genericness, to which a good deal of space is given. Again, I argue that this is a cover-term for a variety of readings with different quantitative extensions. In particular, I argue that the traditional view that the concept must be restricted to 'whole-species' readings is mistaken. I also find it significant that in research on generics appeal is often made to data of extraordinary dubiousness. Acceptability judgements seem to vary enormously, not only regarding genericness but also as regards basic grammaticality. Such discrepancies of opinion among native speakers suggest that genericness is a particularly undefined area of semantics.

Article-languages express definiteness through articles, but languages lacking articles use a variety of other resources. A number of further theoretical issues arise here. How do these other resources work? Are they shared between unrelated languages? Is the definiteness they express identical with that expressed by articles? What is the status of definiteness as a universal category?

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Ultimately, these theoretical problems do not relate to one particular model of grammar or another but to certain general characteristics of linguistic theory as a whole. In particular, they have to do with the rather limited degree to which language can be said to be a well-defined system, with clear-cut categories and black-and-white distinctions. They are also of relevance to the problem of the empirical status of linguistics as a (possibly) cognitive science, although this last is an issue that lies beyond the scope of the present study.

1.3 The English problem

1.3.1 A great deal has been written about definiteness in English. It must be stressed at the outset, however, that I shall focus exclusively on the articles, and omit consideration of definiteness elsewhere in the grammar. It is via the articles that definiteness is quintessentially realized, and it is in analyses of the articles that the descriptive problems are most clearly manifested. Moreover, it is largely on the basis of the evidence of articles in article-languages that definiteness has been proposed at all as a category in other languages. Since the articles constitute the prototypical core of definiteness expression in English, an adequate description of this core must be a necessary precondition for any more comprehensive account of definiteness in English as a whole. However, any description of this core should also be capable, in principle, of extension at least to other determiners and quantifiers, as I shall seek to show.

The word-class 'articles' has been a puzzle to grammarians of English right from the start. An extreme illustration is the view of Gardiner that the articles are no more than 'useless ballast', 'old rubbish':

> It is sometimes said that such relatively insignificant words [i.e. as the articles] are grammatical tools. But the function of tools is to achieve some specific end. That is precisely what, in many cases, the article does not do, or at all events does only in a very slight and uncertain degree. Often it is mere useless ballast, a habit or mannerism accepted by an entire speaking community. The accumulation of old rubbish is so easy. (Gardiner 1932: 47. Cited in Hewson 1972: 78–9)

The word 'article' itself derives from the Greek *arthron*, which in Greek covered relative pronouns and originally also personal pronouns. Latin, however, had no articles, and because the early seventeenth-century grammarians of English based their descriptions on Latin the English articles presented a problem (see e.g. Michael 1970; Vorlat 1975). Most of

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them did not dare to recognize the articles as a separate part of speech, and gave them a variety of descriptive labels such as 'nominal note', 'particle', 'sign of the substantive', 'sign corresponding to the Latin cases', and later 'adjective'. For instance, Michael (1970: 351) quotes from J. Clarke's *Rational Spelling Book* of 1772: 'As there is but one real Case in our Tongue, viz. the Genitive ... we are obliged to have Recourse to Articles to decline our nouns.' It was understood that *a* was a weakened form of the numeral *one*, and that *the* derived from the demonstrative *that*, but there is very little analysis of the different functions of these forms. The definite article *the* was said to 'individuate', and often implied previous reference, while *a* was used with first mentions.

It is really not until Lowth (1762) that articles are taken as a separate word-class in their own right. As such, Lowth was also interested in the characteristics of this word-class as a whole, as well as the differences between the articles. He wrote that the articles – i.e. *the* and *a* – are used before nouns 'to shew how far their signification extends'. And: 'A substantive without any article to limit it is taken in its widest sense' (Lowth 1762: 15ff.: quoted in Michael 1970: 361). We shall have reason to return to this insight later, and also to the connection between the articles in English and case in other languages.

This kind of historical perspective illustrates how the early grammarians looked at the English articles through Greek and Latin spectacles. At the beginning they were not seen as a self-evident well-defined category native to English itself.

1.3.2 As an illustration of the standard contemporary view of the articles, and of the problems which arise from this view, I take the analysis given in Quirk *et al.* (1985) as representative. This is summarized as follows (1985: 265), for common nouns with 'specific reference' (as opposed to 'generic reference').

	DEFINITE		INDEFINITE	
	Count	**Non-count**	**Count**	**Non-count**
Singular	the tiger	the furniture	a tiger	(some) furniture
Plural	the tigers		(some) tigers	

In addition, say the authors, *the*, *a* and 'the zero article' can be used for generic reference, in contexts which vary to some extent for each of these articles.

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Underlying this standard analysis are a number of assumptions which are too rarely challenged (see also Chesterman 1990). Such assumptions include the following:

(a) English has two articles proper, *the* and *a*; plus (sometimes) unstressed *some*.

(b) The set of articles also includes the member 'no article', or 'zero determination'. This is at least sometimes in free variation with *some* in non-generic contexts.

(c) The distribution of the articles (and of 'no article') is determined by a combination of three binary oppositions: definite vs indefinite, count vs non-count and singular vs plural.

(d) There is something called 'generic reference' which can be expressed by *the*, *a* and zero.

(e) Proper names are a separate category, and do not take articles at all in the singular.

There are problems with all these assumptions, which will be discussed at length in subsequent sections. The main issues can be outlined as follows.

Concerning assumption (a): What is the precise status of unstressed *some*? Is it or is it not an article proper? On what criteria are the articles proper to be defined? (See 3.2 below.)

Concerning assumption (b): What is the status of 'no article'? If it is indefinite, why do Quirk *et al.* also feel it necessary to refer (1985: 276) to uses of 'the zero article with definite meaning'? (See 2.1.3, 3.2.) If, as the chart above suggests, zero and *some* are (at least sometimes) in free variation, why is it that they are not always? (See 2.4.)

Concerning assumption (c): A binary division of definite vs indefinite suggests that, according to the chart, *a*, *some* and zero are all indefinite 'in the same way', or at least subcategories of a single category of indefiniteness; but is 'indefiniteness' a unitary concept? (See 4.1.) Presumably not, since the overlap between *some* and zero is by no means perfect. Compare (from Quirk *et al.* 1985) *I've just bought some melons / ?melons* and *They have become vegetarians / *some vegetarians*. And if zero is indefinite, again, how can it also have definite uses?

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Concerning assumption (d): Is 'generic reference' a unitary concept? Again, presumably not, since not every 'generic' article can be used in every generic context: **A tiger is becoming almost extinct*. (See 2.5.)

Concerning assumption (e): It is surely a weakness of this standard description that proper nouns are *not* incorporated into the description in any systematic way. (See 4.4.)

Another severe drawback of this view is the enormous number of exceptions it gives rise to, which plague not only learners of the language but also grammarians and language teachers trying to make sense of the article system. This standard analysis states that the distribution of the articles is restricted in the first place by the class of the noun: only certain nouns (count or non-count/mass) accept given articles. But consider the wealth of 'exceptional usage' here. First, there is the generalization that *a* only occurs with count nouns. Any other usage – such as *a vicious anger*, *a surprising determination* – must therefore be somehow exceptional. Second, since neither *a* nor *the* is supposed to occur with proper names, uses like *There was* ***a Tom Jones*** *on the phone for you* are also exceptions, together with ***the Freddie*** *I knew*, ***a*** *second* ***Milton***, and even ***the*** *River* ***Thames***. Third, singular count nouns are not supposed to take 'no article', and so the many uses where this happens are also relegated to the status of exceptions or 'rather special uses'. Some examples are: ***captain*** *of the team*, *in* ***bed***, *a girl of good* ***family***, *on* ***piano*** *tonight we have …*, *a funny kind of* ***person***, ***sailor*** *he may be*, *but …*, ***doctor*** *will see you now*, ***part*** *is given below*. Exceptions such as these are significant because they all represent productive types, not one-off uses. As exceptions, they are all in fact counter-evidence to the standard rules.

One conclusion to be drawn from this is that it is not helpful to link article usage too directly to noun class, and hence to the distinction between count and non-count. The custom of so doing goes back at least to Jespersen (1924), but there is another research tradition which starts from the very opposite assumption: that, *given an appropriate context*, almost any noun can occur with any article. One major source of this tradition is the work of Guillaume (1919), which will be discussed further in section 2.3 below. In this view, the likelihood of a given noun class occurring with a given article is more a matter of statistics than syntax: some article + noun combinations will occur more frequently than others because certain types of context are, for pragmatic reasons, more frequent. Thus in our culture *dog* is normally thought of as a discrete

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object and hence count, but in another culture *some dog* might denote desirable food and thus become a mass noun. And imagine the giant in 'Jack and the Beanstalk' calling out 'I smell *boy*!' Apart from the obvious impossibility (for historical reasons, *a* deriving from *one*) of *a* + plural, the exceptional cases would be no longer those with an unusual article, but those nouns which consistently reject a given article. This rejection would thus be the result of a clash between something in the meaning of the noun in question and something in the meaning of the article. (This topic is discussed further in 3.1.)

It seems, then, that the problem remains of producing a coherent description of article usage in English, one that does not need to incorporate such a host of exceptions. My own analysis (in chapter 4) will seek to combine insights from several research traditions into a more comprehensive theory of the articles than any of the traditions can provide on its own.

1.4 General outline

The outline of the book is as follows. The main problems have been sketched in preliminary terms in the present chapter. Chapters 2–4 deal with English. Chapter 2 is a critical review of the major research traditions, and concludes with a statement of issues that remain unresolved. Chapter 3 looks at English article usage in some detail, focusing particularly on less cŏmmon or so-called exceptional uses. It also discusses the question of how many articles there actually are. Chapter 4 presents my own unified description of the English articles, based on a componential analysis of definiteness that incorporates three distinct semantic or pragmatic oppositions. Definiteness and indefiniteness are thus taken as composite cover-terms for a complex of inter-related distinctions, rather than labels for a single binary opposition. Definiteness itself is argued not to be a primary notion at all, but compositional. The chapter includes brief indications of how the suggested description can be usefully applied to some related issues, and ends with some speculation on the possible explanatory value of two key concepts in the analysis.

Chapters 5–7 then look at Finnish. Chapter 5 introduces the language and the kinds of data that are relevant to definiteness. Chapter 6 summarizes the Finnish research tradition on definiteness from the beginning of the century. Most of the significant work has been done in response to a proposal by Siro in the 1960s, and the chapter accordingly

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discusses this response in some detail, according to each particular line of argument used. In chapter 7 I then develop my own analysis of the ways in which definiteness can be expressed or inferred in Finnish. I also claim that some of the ways traditionally proposed must be rejected, such as stress and, to some extent, word order.

Chapter 8 has an explicitly contrastive focus. It lines up the analyses of the two languages side by side and demonstrates the extent to which they can both be stated in the same terms. This common descriptive denominator is then used to establish a number of correspondences between given structures in the two languages. The chapter also points out several diachronic similarities in the historical development of some English articles and some Finnish function words.

Chapter 9 discusses a number of wider theoretical issues arising from the study. These partly have to do with the theory of definiteness and reference in general. Similarities are noted with descriptions of definiteness and/or reference in several other, unrelated, languages. Attention is drawn to the fact that evidence from many languages suggests that both definiteness and reference are scalar phenomena. This in turn has implications for the relation between language and logic. The study also illustrates how the borderline between grammar and pragmatics is drawn differently in different languages. The evidence presented is thus pertinent to the whole issue of the delimitation of grammar as what Levinson (1987) calls 'frozen pragmatics'. Finally, a comparison is drawn between the kind of fuzzy grammar that appears to be necessary for an analysis of definiteness, and more general theoretical principles that seem to indicate the existence of a new paradigm in linguistics.

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2 *English articles: the research traditions*

2.1 Background

2.1.1 This chapter brings together a wide range of research trends on the articles. In the course of the discussion a number of questions will be raised that do not yet seem to have been satisfactorily resolved, such as the following: Is definiteness a simple binary opposition? What do 'definite' and 'indefinite' mean? How many articles are there? What does 'no article' mean? What is the individual meaning of each article? The underlying theme of the chapter is that these questions can only be answered adequately within a theory of the articles that will incorporate insights from several research traditions into a coherent whole, for each of the existing descriptions is in some way or other too restricted.

In very general terms, modern research into the English articles has tended to fall into one of three broad types. One approach, starting with Russell (1905), centres on the meaning of definiteness and the expression of this meaning throughout the grammar. A second approach is illustrated by studies in the generative tradition: here the concern is with the correct derivation of the articles, the rules that will generate the correct article in a given context. The third approach has been to start with the articles themselves, their distribution and meaning, and also with the question of which forms should actually count as articles. My main sources of inspiration derive primarily from this third approach, and I shall accordingly mention the first two research traditions only briefly.

The philosophical tradition starts from the opposition between definite and indefinite reference. The meaning of the two terms of this opposition may be preliminarily glossed as follows: a definite NP has a referent which is assumed by the speaker to be unambiguously identifiable by the hearer (in brief, a known or identifiable referent); and an indefinite NP has a referent which is assumed by the speaker not to be unambiguously identifiable by the hearer (i.e. a new, or unknown, referent). Precisely what 'definite' or 'identifiable' mean has been the subject of much debate,

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