

# 1

## Basic observations

This chapter sets the scene by presenting some basic issues and ideas, which will be investigated in greater depth in the rest of the study. It begins by examining the concept of definiteness itself, to establish a preliminary account of what this concept amounts to. This is followed by consideration of the various types of noun phrase which are generally regarded as definite or indefinite – since definiteness and indefiniteness are not limited to noun phrases introduced by *the* or *a*. Finally, some basic ideas concerning the syntactic structure of noun phrases are presented in outline. English is taken as the starting point, with comparative observations on other languages where appropriate, because it is easier and less confusing to outline basic issues as they are instantiated in one language, where this can be done, than to hop from one language to another. For this purpose, English serves as well as any language, since it has readily identifiable lexical articles, which make definite and indefinite noun phrases on the whole easy to distinguish. It is important to bear in mind that the discussion in this chapter is preliminary, and aims at a tentative and provisional account of the points examined. Many of the proposals made here and solutions suggested to problems of analysis will be refined as the study progresses.

### 1.1 What is definiteness?

I begin in this section by attempting to establish in informal, pre-theoretical terms what the intuitions about meaning are that correspond to our terming a noun phrase “definite” or “indefinite”.

#### 1.1.1 *Simple definites and indefinites*

In many languages a noun phrase may contain an element which seems to have as its sole or principal role to indicate the definiteness or indefiniteness of the noun phrase. This element may be a lexical item like the definite and indefinite articles of English (*the*, *a*), or an affix of some kind like the Arabic definite prefix *al-* and indefinite suffix *-n*. I shall refer to such elements by the traditional label **article**, without commitment at this stage to what their grammatical status actually

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is. Of course not all noun phrases contain an article – probably in any language – though the definite–indefinite distinction is never thought of as applying only to those that do. This is clear from the fact that in English *this house* would usually be judged (at least by linguists and grammarians) to be definite and *several houses* indefinite; judgments would probably be more hesitant over *every house*. Noun phrases with *the* and *a* and their semantic equivalents (or near-equivalents) in other languages can be thought of as the basic instantiations of definite and indefinite noun phrases, in that the definiteness or indefiniteness stems from the presence of the article, which has as its essential semantic function to express this category.<sup>1</sup> I shall refer to such noun phrases as **simple definites** and **simple indefinites**, and I limit the discussion to them in this section to avoid any possibility of disagreement over the definite or indefinite status of example noun phrases.

So the question we are concerned with is: What is the difference in meaning between *the car* and *a car*, between *the greedy child* and *a greedy child*, between *the hibiscus I planted last summer* and *a hibiscus I planted last summer*? Many traditional grammars would give answers like the following: *The* indicates that the speaker or writer is referring to a definite or particular car etc., not just any. But apart from being rather vague, this answer is quite inaccurate. If I say *I bought a car this morning*, I am not referring to just any car; the car I bought is a particular one, and is distinguished in my mind from all others. Yet *a car* is indefinite. There is in fact no general agreement on what the correct answer is, but two major components of meaning have been much discussed, and I introduce these in 1.1.2 and 1.1.3 in relation to some illustrative English data.

**1.1.2 Familiarity and identifiability**

Continuing with the example just considered, compare the following two sentences:

- (1) I bought **a car** this morning.
- (2) I bought **the car** this morning.

*The car* here is in some sense more “definite”, “specific”, “particular”, “individualized” etc. than *a car*, but, as noted above, *a car* certainly denotes a particular or specific car as far as the speaker is concerned. The difference is that the reference of *the car* in (2) is assumed to be clear to the hearer as well as the speaker. This is the first crucial insight; whereas in the case of an indefinite noun phrase the speaker may be aware of what is being referred to and the hearer probably

<sup>1</sup> We will see, however, that articles can encode more than definiteness or indefiniteness, and that they have been argued to have a quite different principal function, at least in some languages.

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not, with a definite noun phrase this awareness is signalled as being shared by both participants. One would typically utter (1) where the car in question has no place yet in the hearer's experience, and is being newly introduced to it. (2) would be used where the hearer knows or has seen the speaker's new car. She may be at the wheel right now, or they may be standing looking at it together in her drive; or it may be that the hearer has not yet seen the car in the speaker's possession, but was aware that she had been looking over a particular car in a showroom recently.<sup>2</sup>

Examples like these have led to a view of definiteness known as the **familiarity** hypothesis. *The* signals that the entity denoted by the noun phrase is familiar to both speaker and hearer, and *a* is used where the speaker does not want to signal such shared familiarity. The familiarity hypothesis has a long history, and its first full presentation is in Christophersen (1939), a work which has greatly influenced much subsequent writing on the subject. The major recent work in this tradition is Hawkins (1978), and the discussion I give here owes much to this account.

As further illustration, consider (3)–(12):

- (3) Just give **the shelf** a quick wipe, will you, before I put this vase on it.
- (4) Put these clean towels in **the bathroom** please.
- (5) I hear **the prime minister** behaved outrageously again today.
- (6) **The moon** was very bright last night.
- (7) An elegant, dark-haired woman, a well-dressed man with dark glasses, and two children entered the compartment. I immediately recognized **the woman**. **The children** also looked vaguely familiar.
- (8) I had to get a taxi from the station. On the way **the driver** told me there was a bus strike.
- (9) They've just got in from New York. **The plane** was five hours late.
- (10) **The president of Ghana** is visiting tomorrow.
- (11) **The bloke Ann went out with last night** phoned a minute ago.
- (12) a. **The fact that you've known them for years** is no excuse.  
 b. We were rather worried by **the prospect of having to cook for six for two weeks**.

<sup>2</sup> This is something of a simplification, skirting a number of issues subject to debate. First, there is dispute over whether definite noun phrases can be referring expressions, or whether it is rather speakers who sometimes refer using them. Second, if definites can refer or be used to refer, it is less clear that reference is involved in the case of indefinites like *a car* here. Nevertheless, the distinction drawn captures a clear intuition, and its expression in terms of speaker's and hearer's familiarity with a referent is standard in at least the less technical literature. I return to this in Chapter 4.

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Examples (3)–(5) show **situational** uses of *the*, in that the physical situation in which the speaker and hearer are located contributes to the familiarity of the referent of the definite noun phrase. In (3) the situation is the immediate, visible one; the shelf is familiar to speaker and hearer in that it is before their eyes. In (4) the situation is still relatively immediate, though the referent of the definite noun phrase is probably not visible; in a particular house, the hearer would most naturally take it that the reference is to the bathroom of that house. In (5) the relevant situation is wider; in a particular country, the reference to *the prime minister* would normally be taken to be to the prime minister of that country; the individual concerned is not personally known to the hearer, but is familiar in the sense of being known to exist and probably known by report. (6) can be regarded as a situational use in which the situation is the whole world, or as a use in which familiarity stems from **general knowledge**. Thus *the moon* is taken to refer to the particular moon associated with this planet, or to a unique entity forming part of the hearer's general knowledge.

In (7) we have examples of **anaphoric** *the*. The referents of *the woman* and *the children* are familiar not from the physical situation but from the linguistic context; they have been mentioned before. In this example the previous mention takes place in an earlier sentence uttered by the same speaker, but it could equally well occur in part of the discourse spoken by another person, as in the following exchange:

- (13) A: An old man, two women and several children were already there when I arrived.  
 B: Did you recognize **the old man**?

It is significant that in (7) and (13) the earlier mentions of the woman, the children and the old man take the form of indefinite noun phrases; new referents are introduced into the discourse in this form because they are so far unfamiliar to the hearer.

Examples (8) and (9) are **bridging cross-reference** or **associative** uses, and can be thought of as a combination of the anaphoric and general knowledge types. In (8) the driver has not been mentioned before, but there has been mention of a taxi, and it is part of our general knowledge that taxis have drivers. The idea is that the mention of a taxi conjures up for the hearer all the things that are associated with taxis (a driver, wheels, seats, the fare etc.), and any of these things can then be referred to by means of a definite noun phrase. So the referent of *the driver* is familiar through association with the antecedent *a taxi*. (9) is particularly interesting because the antecedent which warrants the definite *the plane* is not even a noun phrase. But travelling from New York to most places necessarily involves some form of conveyance, with an aircraft being the most likely if the present conversation is taking place in, say, Manchester.

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There are two possible ways of characterizing (10). The hearer may not know the president of Ghana personally, nor even have heard of him, but will know from his knowledge of the world that there probably is such an individual. The alternative characterization involves taking the definite article to be modifying not *president of Ghana*, but just *president*, so that *of Ghana* is a phrase added to provide clarifying information and not itself within the scope of *the*. On this view, the prepositional phrase has the same function as the previous mention of *a taxi* in (8): to provide a trigger for the association that familiarizes the definite noun phrase. If this is correct, then it is possible for an associative use of *the* to be based on following as well as preceding information. A similar treatment seems appropriate for (11). In this example, the familiarity of *the bloke* depends on the following relative clause. Assume that the hearer did not even know that Ann had gone out last night. The relative clause informs him of this, and also informs him that she went out with someone. The familiarity of *the bloke* then consists of its association with this succeeding information.

Finally, consider (12). Here, *that you've known them for years* is the fact in question, and *having to cook for six for two weeks* is the prospect. So these clauses, again following rather than preceding the definite noun phrase, act as “antecedent” for *the fact* and *the prospect*, which are therefore anticipatory anaphoric (or “cataphoric”) uses.

It may be already clear from this presentation that the concept of familiarity as an explanation for the definite–indefinite distinction is not unproblematic. It is fairly straightforward for examples like (3)–(6), where the hearer is genuinely acquainted with the referent, (7), where previous mention makes the referent familiar (by report rather than direct acquaintance), and even (8), where the fact that taxis always have drivers affords the same sort of familiarity as in (7). But getting from New York to Manchester does not necessarily involve flying; the association appealed to in (9) is certainly real, but can one really say that the plane was in any sense known to the hearer before the utterance of the second sentence of this example? In (10), the hearer would normally be prepared to accept that Ghana has a president, but that is not the same as knowing this person. In (12), where cataphoric information is appealed to, one can claim that the necessary familiarity is established after the utterance of the definite noun phrase, but in (11), the fact that Ann went out with a man is not expressed in the relative clause; in fact, *the bloke* can be replaced by *a bloke*, without changing the referent, which seems to make it clear that the information in the relative clause is not such as to establish the familiarity that would make *the* obligatory.

Because of considerations like these, many linguists basically sympathetic to the familiarity thesis prefer to see definiteness as being about **identifiability**. The idea is that the use of the definite article directs the hearer to the referent of the

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noun phrase by signalling that he is in a position to identify it.<sup>3</sup> This view of definiteness does not altogether reject familiarity. Rather, familiarity, where it is present, is what enables the hearer to identify the referent. In such cases the hearer is invited to match the referent of the definite noun phrase with some real-world entity which he knows to exist because he can see it, has heard of it, or infers its existence from something else he has heard.

In the examples discussed above where familiarity seems rather forced, it is generally the case that the definiteness of the noun phrase confirms an association which is only probable or possible rather than known. In (9), the journey mentioned makes the involvement of an aircraft likely, and then the definite noun phrase *the plane* authorizes the hearer to associate its referent with this journey, confirming the possible association. It does this by indicating that its referent can be identified by the hearer, and the most straightforward identification is with a plane the travellers probably came on from New York. A similar association is involved in (10); Ghana probably has a president, and it is with this probable individual that the reference of *the president* is identified. But in this example, the phrase which provides the probable referent occurs after the definite noun phrase and is attached to it in such a way as to make the association certain rather than probable. In (11) the relative clause provides a context in which a referent for *the bloke* can be found. Ann went out last night with someone, and the referent of *the bloke* is that someone, even though the relative does not provide any information about the person (that it was a man, for example).

So while on the familiarity account *the* tells the hearer that he knows which, on the identifiability account it tells him that he knows or can work out which. Let us now consider a case where an explanation in terms of familiarity would be impossible. Back in the sitting-room which was the setting for (3), Ann is trying to put up a picture on the wall, and, without turning round, says to Joe who has just entered:

(14) Pass me **the hammer**, will you?

Joe looks around and, sure enough, sees a hammer on a chair. The difference between (14) and (3) is that, whereas the hearer in (3) knows there is a shelf in the room which provides an obvious referent for the definite noun phrase, Joe does not know at the time of Ann's utterance that there is a hammer in the room. He has to look

<sup>3</sup> Note that the article itself does not identify the referent; *the* is a "grammatical word" with no descriptive lexical content, and therefore contains nothing which can itself identify a referent. The most it can do is invite the hearer to exploit clues in the linguistic or extralinguistic context to establish the identity of the referent. The article has been said by many writers to "pick out" an entity, but this is inaccurate; *the* may be about identifiability, but not identification.

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for a referent, guided by the description *hammer*.<sup>4</sup> The definite article tells Joe that he can identify the hammer Ann is talking about, and the verb *pass* (which tends to take things immediately available as complement, by contrast with *fetch*, *get*, *buy*) makes it almost certain that he will find it in the room. The referent of the definite noun phrase is unfamiliar to the hearer, but he is able to find a referent for it.

#### 1.1.3 Uniqueness and inclusiveness

Identifiability certainly offers a more comprehensive picture than does familiarity, but there are also cases of definites for which an account in terms of identifiability is either not fully convincing or simply inadequate.

Associative uses of the definite article in general are problematic for identifiability; consider the following example:

(15) I've just been to a wedding. **The bride** wore blue.

The definite reference *the bride* in (15) is successful because the hearer knows that weddings involve brides, and makes the natural inference that the reference is to the bride at the particular wedding just mentioned. But is it accurate to say that the hearer identifies the referent in any real sense? He still does not know who she is or anything about her. If asked later who got married that morning he would be in no position to say on the basis of (15), and if he passes the newly-wed in the street the next day he will not recognize her as the person referred to.

Many situational uses are also associative; they work because the hearer is able to associate a definite noun phrase with some entity which he expects to find in or associates with the situation. This is the case with the following:

(16) [Nurse entering operating theatre]  
 I wonder who **the anaesthetist** is today.

A definite is possible because we take it for granted that operations involve anaesthetists. But it is clear from what is said in (16) that the speaker cannot identify the referent of the definite noun phrase, and does not necessarily expect the hearer to be able to. Both participants know there is or will be such an individual, but that is not identification. The point becomes all the clearer if we replace the definite article in (16) by a demonstrative:

(17) I wonder who **that anaesthetist** is.

<sup>4</sup> In the semantics literature, the term “description” is used of all material that ascribes properties to entities – including nouns as well as, more obviously, adjectives. A particularly important use of the word, especially in the philosophical literature, is in the term **definite description**, meaning an expression which ascribes a property or properties to a particular entity – in other words, a definite noun phrase. *The hammer*, then, is a definite description.

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Again the speaker does not know the identity of the person referred to, but she is referring to a particular individual and expects the hearer to be able to pick out precisely which individual she means. This is not the case with (16), indicating that while demonstratives may require identifiability, definites do not.

Consider also a cataphoric case, where the definite article is sanctioned by a relative clause following the noun:

- (18) Mary's gone for a spin in **the car she just bought**.

In (18) the relative tells the hearer something about the car (the fact that Mary just bought it), but it does not help him identify it. He still would not know the car in question if he saw it (unless Mary was driving it).

What can be claimed about all these examples is that they involve the idea of **uniqueness**: the definite article signals that there is just one entity satisfying the description used. This uniqueness is generally not absolute, but is to be understood relative to a particular context. Thus in (15) there is just one bride at the wedding which triggers the association. In (16) the assumption is that there is just one anaesthetist taking part in the operation about to begin, but who it is is not known. And in (20) *the* conveys that Mary bought one car.

In the associative examples an indefinite article would seem unnatural, for various reasons; in (15), for example, the general knowledge on which the association is based includes an assumed normal pattern of one bride per wedding. But in (18) it is perfectly possible to substitute *a* for *the*:

- (19) Mary's gone for a spin in **a car she just bought**.

The most natural interpretation is still that only one car is involved, but the possibility is left open that Mary may have just bought more than one car. So the indefinite article does not signal non-uniqueness; rather it does not signal uniqueness. Indefinites are neutral with respect to uniqueness (though this will be qualified below).

As observed, the uniqueness of the definite article is usually relative to a particular context, but it can be absolute. This is the case with nouns which are inherently unique, denoting something of which there is only one. We can speak of *the sun* and *the universe*, but not normally of *a sun* or *a universe*; the qualification is important, because although for most purposes we think of our sun and our universe as the only entities to which those names apply, there are situations in which we might speak of our sun as one of many or entertain the possibility of there existing another universe. Nouns like *Pope* are also often thought of as inherent uniques, because there is usually only one at any given time; but of course if one looks across history there have been many Popes, and with this perspective it is reasonable to speak of *a Pope*. The fact that one can always find a context in which



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a noun ceases to be uniquely denoting does not invalidate the point. Just as it is possible to claim that the count–mass distinction is basically valid despite the possibility of recategorizing any noun (as in the count use of the basically mass *milk* in *He strode up to the bar and ordered three milks*), so there is a class of inherently unique nouns. And such nouns, used as uniquely denoting, require the definite article.

Consider also the following immediate situation definite:

- (20) Beware of **the dog**.

This is intended to inform the reader that there is a dog in the vicinity, and that he is likely to meet it if he waits long enough or proceeds any further. One could argue that identifiability is involved, in that if he sees a dog nearby he is likely to connect it with the one mentioned in the notice. But there is no expectation that he will seek a referent for *the dog*; rather, (20) is equivalent to *There is a dog*. Uniqueness, on the other hand, does seem to offer an adequate account here, since an intrepid intruder could reasonably claim to have been misled if he found he had to deal with two dogs.

The uniqueness criterion is particularly attractive in cases where the referent is hypothetical, potential, or in the future:

- (21) **The winner of this competition** will get a week in the Bahamas for two.  
 (22) **The man who comes with me** will not regret it.

Assuming the competition in (21) is not yet over and no one has yet agreed to accompany the speaker in (22), the winner and the man are certainly not yet identifiable. But they are unique, in that a single winner and a single male companion are clearly implied.

Finally, there are certain other modifying constituents of the noun phrase which are incompatible with the indefinite article; among these are superlatives, *first*, *same*, *only* and *next*:

- (23) Janet is **the/(\*)a cleverest child** in the class.  
 (24) You are **the/(\*)a first visitor** to our new house.  
 (25) I've got **the/(\*)a same problem** as you.  
 (26) He is **the/(\*)an only student** who dislikes phonology.  
 (27) I offered a discount to **the/(\*)a next customer**.

Uniqueness offers an explanation for these facts, according to Hawkins (1978), since the unacceptability of the indefinite article seems likely to stem from a semantic incompatibility between an element of uniqueness in the meaning of the modifier

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and the non-uniqueness of *a*. For although I have said that the indefinite article is neutral with respect to uniqueness, there are cases where choosing *a* rather than *the* implies non-uniqueness; this is a point I will return to. For the moment it will suffice to look at it in this way: if the descriptive material in the noun phrase indicates that the referent is unique, then the only appropriate article is the one that encodes uniqueness. This is the case with inherently unique nouns, and noun phrases containing superlatives etc. *Cleverest* means ‘cleverer than all the others’, and *first* means ‘before all the others’; so uniqueness can be argued to be involved here, as it obviously is with *only*. In (25), if the hearer has a single problem, or a single salient problem, as seems to be implied, then the speaker can have only one problem which is the same as the hearer’s. *Next* means ‘immediately following’, and given that customers are generally dealt with one by one, there can be only one customer who immediately follows the preceding one.

All the examples so far considered in this section have involved count nouns in the singular. But the definite article can occur equally well with plural count nouns and mass nouns, and the obvious question is: How can a definite noun phrase which is plural or mass have a referent which is unique (in the context)? The noun phrases *the pens* and *the butter* (the latter occurring with its usual mass value and not recategorized as count) cannot refer to just one pen and just one butter. Let us look at examples corresponding to those examined above, but with plural (the (a) sentences) and mass (the (b) ones) definite noun phrases:

- (28) a. We’ve just been to see John race. The Queen gave out **the prizes**.  
 b. We went to the local pub this lunch time. They’ve started chilling **the beer**.
- (29) a. [Nurse about to enter operating theatre]  
 I wonder who **the anaesthetists** are.  
 b. [Examining restaurant menu]  
 I wonder what **the pâté** is like.
- (30) a. We’re looking for **the vandals** who broke into the office yesterday.  
 b. I can’t find **the shampoo** I put here this morning.
- (31) a. Beware of **the dogs**.  
 b. Beware of **the electrified wire**.
- (32) a. We’re offering several prizes, and **the winners** will be invited to London for the presentation.  
 b. Fred’s decided to take up home brewing. He plans to sell **the beer** to his friends.
- (33) a. Janet and John are **the cleverest children** in the class.  
 b. This is **the best muesli** I’ve ever tasted.
- (34) a. You are **the first visitors** to our new house.  
 b. This is **the first rain** to be seen here for five months.