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THE THEORETICAL ELABORATIONS ON THE DEFINITE ARTICLE *THE*

Introduction

The definite article 'the' has been examined by linguists for many years, but still its complete and accurate meaning seems not to have been completely studied and explained. Researchers have examined this article in various fields of science, namely linguistics in particular, but also in philosophy, logic and psychology. Apart from these fields, they also investigated the definite article from a spectrum of miscellaneous theoretical perspectives, e.g. computational linguistics, logical semantics, psycholinguistics, functionalism, etc. The former studies on the definite article *the* proved to be fairly similar when taking into account the types of obtained data and their examinations as well as the general theoretical queries they attempt to answer. To specify our elaboration more profoundly, we may state that the research that was observed so far concentrated on "the referential function" of the article, namely on the use of a noun phrase with *the* to make a selection of an individual, to be able to choose the unit from all other accessible entities in the whole spectrum of existing entities. What is subsequently denoted by the appropriate use of *the*? Mostly, we come across a term "uniqueness", "identifiability", "unique identifiability", "familiarity". These are the main terms observable in many scientific articles, research studies, research results and linguistic comments, where the definite article simply reflects a matter of reference, e.g. by means of distinguishing individuals. The following scholars are supporters of this claim: Abbott 1999; Birner and Ward 1994, Chafe 1994; Chesterman 1991; Clark and Marshall 1981; Fraurud 1990; Grosz 1981; Hawkins 1978, 1984, 1991; Hintikka and Kulas 1985; Karttunen 1968; Kempson 1975; Kleiber 1992; Lambrecht 1994; Lewis 1979; Löbner 1985; Lyons 1980, 1999; Ojeda 1991; Poesio and Vieira 1998; Prince 1992; Searle 1969 and Wilson 1992. Their studies have been based on the assumption that there is slightly more to the meaning of *the* than its ability to select referents: "unique identifiability is both necessary and sufficient for appropriate use of the definite article *the*" (Gundel et al. 1993: 277).

Obviously the results of their studies must have led to very intriguing responses to posed queries and desired expectations, but no one has seriously managed to explain the meaning that was exposed thanks to conducted studies

that can account for all uses of the definite article in English. Therefore it is worth considering and elaborating on a different approach to the problem of definiteness, which is extension and two theories coined by Fauconnier (1994) – a theory of mental spaces and accessibility theory by Ariel (1990). They will be a matter of elaboration in the following parts of the article.

Extension and its definitions

In any of available studies that concern the use of *signs*, for example, linguistics, the *extension* of a concept, idea, or sign is related to the things to which it applies, in contrast with its *comprehension* or *intension*, which consists approximately of the ideas, properties, or corresponding signs that are implied or suggested by the concept in question.

The term ‘extension’ is defined differently depending on available paper or electronic sources. Below we may follow some of the available, relevant definitions.

In philosophical semantics or the philosophy of language, the *extension* of a concept or expression is the set of things it extends to, or applies to, if it is the sort of concept or expression that a single object by itself can satisfy (Wikipedia, online source).

The next definition of this term is that “the extension of a linguistic expression is the class of elements that the expression denotes” (Busmann 1996: 160).

Concepts and expressions of this sort are *monadic* or “one-place” concepts and expressions (New World Encyclopedia, online source), e.g. the extension of the word “*dog*” is the set of all (past, present and future) dogs in the world. The set includes Fido, Rover, Lassie, Rex, etc.

In the context of formal logic, the extension of a whole *statement*, as opposed to a word or phrase, is sometimes defined (arguably by convention) as its logical value. That is why in that view, the extension of “Lassie is famous” is the logical value *true*, since Lassie *is* famous.

Some concepts and expressions do not apply to objects individually, but rather serve to relate objects to objects. For example, the words “*before*” and “*after*” do not apply to objects individually, it makes no sense to say, e.g. “*Jim is before*” or “*Jim is after*”, but to one thing in relation to another, as in “*The wedding is before the reception*” and “*The reception is after the wedding.*”

Such “relational” or “polyadic” (“many-place”) concepts and expressions have, for their extension, the set of all sequences of objects that satisfy the concept or expression in question.

The extension of “*before*” is the set of all (ordered) pairs of objects such that the first one is before (precedes) the second one.

Extension and the definite article *the*

Having introduced the basic concept of extension, there remain several queries that need to be posed and most probably answered here.

They are the following:

- how does it all apply to the definite article?
- is its meaning extended or not? If so, how can it be justified and conveyed to potential addressees?
- how can its meaning be fully comprehended and subsequently appropriately used by any potential volunteers, so practically anyone who is willing to use English properly – from pre-primary school learners to young advanced adults graduating from English philology courses?

As far as the notion *extension* and its relation to the definite article in English are concerned, we may state that such a relation is observable, however it is not approved by many scholars, hence the extended meaning of this article is not so widespread or publicly known, let alone taught to L2 users.

Two researchers, Clark and Haviland (1977: 7–8) use the term *addition* to refer to the phenomenon, whereby *the* serves to introduce a new discourse referent at the very beginning of any passage, report or story. They claim that such violations of the uniqueness requirement on definite descriptions are appropriate and relevant because they become a conventionalized aspect of literary discourse (see also Lambrecht 1994: 197). While this phenomenon is apparently a literary convention, we have also seen that it is more general than that. The use of *the* to introduce new topics is not confined to literature, nor does it occur only at the beginning of a text. In the following examples, listed below, *the* appears at the beginning of an episode with a narrative or it occurs at the midpoint of a narrative sequence:

- (1) Regulations are obeyed when possible but are breached in emergencies. There was the case of *the ice pier*, for example.
(The excerpt derives from a scientific research outpost in Antarctica named McMurdo Station).
- (2) This example about *the monkey trap* will be further quoted and described in section 7 (Discourse prominence).
- (3) [Elias Ayuso] had been an academic gypsy ever since *the fire* (New York Times, 1 August 1995, p. B11)
- (4) – Did you hear about *the fight*?
– What fight?
– Between Charles and Steven.
(This example was heard by the author of the article mentioned by one of his colleagues).
- (5) – [hh]
– Uh huh.
– Until, about an hour later, when *the ...mosquitoes*. Hit.
– Oh, no.
(The same reference as in example 4)

Bearing that in mind, we could suggest that, instead of analyzing *the* as a marker of accessibility, the rudimentary meaning of the article should remain unique indentifiability and that the prominence associated with the entities in

the instances above should be derived pragmatically as an *extension* from this basic meaning. For example, Abbott (1999) questions that “emphatic *the*” conveys prominence through hyperbole. In her opinion, a sentence such as “*Outside the US, soccer is THE sport*” literally means that soccer is the only (e.g., unique) sport in other countries, which is apparently not true. She claims that “standard Gricean mechanisms” are then invoked, constructing the hyperbolic conviction that soccer is a highly prominent sport (Abbot 1999: 3).

The definite article *the* and its functions

We distinguish several functions of the definite article in English. They were outlined in the introduction and are exemplified below:

- referential function – use of a NP with *the* to pick out an individual, ‘to distinguish it all from all other individuals in the universe of discourse’ (Lyons 1977: 19),
- conveying the idea of particularity (Mańczak-Wohlfeld et al. 1998; Murphy 1994),
- familiarity (Christophersen 1939; Heim 1982; Murphy 1994; Foley and Hall 2003),
- uniqueness (Russell 1905; Kadmon 1990; Hewings 2005),
- specificity (Hewings 2005),
- identifiability (Chafe 1976; Du Bois 1980; Yule 2006),
- unique identifiability (Givon 1984; Gundel et al. 1993),
- the referent’s presence in the speakers’ ‘shared world’ (Foley and Hall 2003).

Available theories of *the*

Previous theories of the definite article *the* concentrated on two main ways of analyzing this type of function words, namely: *identifiability analysis* and *familiarity analysis*.

Identifiability denotes that ‘the referent of the NP must be identifiable to the hearer’ (Birner and Ward 1994: 93), identifiable meaning must be unique, therefore ‘definite NPs refer to (the unique set which is) the maximal collection of things which fit their descriptive content’ (Kadmon 1990: 274).

Familiarity, on the other hand, refers to the use of *the* which requires the referent to be introduced into the discourse; “the article *the* brings it about that to the potential meaning (the idea) of the word is attached a certain association with previously acquired knowledge” (Christophersen 1939: 72).

Identifiability and familiarity are not identical but overlapping notions, in other words “an entity must be familiar in a given discourse to be identifiable” (Birner and Ward 1994: 96). Following we may state that the main analysis of *the* focused on identifying the sources of definiteness, in other words factors permitting the speaker to consider a discourse referent as familiar or uniquely identifiable for the addressee.

Hawkins (1991) in his typology of definiteness referred to the terms of identifiability/familiarity as to:

- situations in which an entity is a member of the “previous discourse set”, e.g. “mention of *a professor* permits subsequent reference to *the professor*” (Hawkins 1991: 408),
- an entity identifiable/familiar in the immediate situation of utterance in which the speaker and the hearer are situated, e.g. “*Pass me that bucket*” becomes unambiguous for the addressee if there is just one bucket in his/her field of vision’ (Hawkins 1991: 408),
- knowledge shared by people in the same physical location (“larger situation set”), for instance, a city or a country, may justify the assumption that a referent is identifiable/familiar: “inhabitants of the same town who have never met before can immediately talk about *the mayor*, meaning the unique mayor of their town” (Hawkins 1991: 408),
- a very general kind of common knowledge shared by e.g. a given community regarding predictable coincidences or co-occurrences of entities providing the appropriate grounds for identifiability and familiarity, as in the instance below:

after a previous linguistic mention of *a class*, the speaker can immediately talk of *the professor*, *the textbook*, *the final exam*. All members of the relevant linguistic community know that the set of things which make up a class typically include these (Hawkins 1991: 409)

- a referent considered identifiable/familiar when the relevant information is provided within the definite NP itself, e.g. via a genitive phrase or a relative clause, for instance *the roof of my house*, *the professor we were just talking about*.

Now there exists one question which needs to be posed here and answered. What problems are faced with previous theories of *the*? Such notions as “identifiability”, “uniqueness” and “familiarity” are continuously difficult to be defined in a relevant way. For example, Hawkins (1984: 649) states that:

defining what it means for something to be ‘identifiable’ is, however, no easy matter... an adequate definition of identifiability covering every single use of a definite description is probably doomed from the start.

Many researchers treat the term of identifiability for granted and do not make any subsequent efforts to define it precisely. There are some who do attempt to define it, but they usually confine themselves to elaborating on distinguishing, picking out of individuating a referent in question. Such names as *distinguish*, *pick out*, *select* or *individuate* are not more precise than the term *identify*. As far as *uniqueness* is concerned, we come across a rudimentary query related to this notion, which is, as Hawkins (1984: 650) puts it, “unique in what sense?... What are, in general, the parameters relative to which singular definite NPs refer uniquely?” Some of the main parameters and much of the current literature are devoted to it, namely, e.g. a previous mention. It is clear and evident that when we use an indefinite article *a* or *the*, we are supposed to use the definite article when we mention something, someone for the second and -nth time. However, in many cases, it is challenging to indicate the relevant parameter (domain) within which the uniqueness of a definite description is preserved. The considerable diversity

of indirect anaphora (bridging) derives from this problem of delimiting domains. Similar problems arise when we attempt to use uniqueness to many of the above instances. Concluding, Heim (1982) has defined “familiarity” precisely and formally, but her definition is rather so confined that a heavy empirical burden overwhelms the notion of “accommodation”, which itself is very badly comprehended: “I can say only very little about the rules that govern accommodation” (Heim 1982: 372).

Mental spaces theory and accessibility theory

In order to distinguish the appropriate use and meaning of the definite article *the*, the following theories contrasting with the available ones have been coined. They are: accessibility theory of Ariel (1990) and mental spaces theory of Fauconnier (1994), each of which consider grammatical elements to be discourse processing instructions. In the processing of any discourse *the* triggers the establishment of connections between various sorts of cognitive domains and the mental entities within these domains. All uses of *the* mark the “accessibility” of the discourse referent, namely that the article is a grammatical signal contributing both to the construction and retrieval of mental entities.

Speakers select *the* for miscellaneous reasons. Mainly to:

- distinguish (identify) discourse entities,
- convey the prominence of a discourse entity (entity’s status as a role function, a shift in point of view).

The notion “accessibility”, outlined above, also refers to the degree of activation of information in long or short-term memory. Highly accessible mental entities, those which are most active in consciousness, require less processing effort to be retrieved and implemented than do entities of low accessibility. Ariel (1990: 22–30) distinguishes 4 factors affecting accessibility:

- (1) Recency of mention (the more recent the last mention of an entity, the more accessible it will be).
- (2) Saliency (physical or discourse salience).
- (3) Competition (relative salience of an entity compared to other entities).
- (4) Unity (whether an antecedent is within the same paragraph/frame/point of view as an anaphor).

A number of researchers have suggested accessibility hierarchies, in which nominal referring expressions ranked on a continuum ranging from the highest accessibility markers at one end, e.g. zero anaphora and pronouns, to lowest accessibility markers at the other, e.g. proper names (Ariel 1988, 1990, 1994; Givón 1983, 1992; Gundel et al. 1993).

Following these hierarchies, they state that definite descriptions are markers of low accessibility, referring generally to entities not highly active in memory. Evidence from their research proves that, in the first place, definite descriptions can abound in information. Moreover, definite descriptions are usually used to refer back to relatively distant antecedents, for example:

There's a cat and a dog in the garden. *The cat* is eating a mouse.

The presence of the dog lowers the accessibility of the cat, making the definite description a natural choice in this context. Let us provide the subsequent example:

There's a cat in the yard. *It's* eating a mouse.

There's a cat in the yard. *The cat* is eating a mouse.

The cat is odd as its antecedent is too highly accessible.

The basic meaning of *the* is as follows: signal to the addressee the availability of an "access path", e.g. the article indicates that the knowledge required for interpreting a given noun phrase is accessible. If it is, then the entity designated by the noun phrase will be accessible as well, by means of the path (the set of cognitive links) that can be constructed between it and the accessible knowledge.

Access paths triggered by definite descriptions (markers of low accessibility) are typically more complex, they tend to comprise a larger number of elements, links and/or mental spaces, than paths triggered by markers of intermediate or high accessibility. The addressee must usually seek information beyond the noun phrase itself, e.g.

I bought a book – a clear meaning.

I bought the book – some additional information is needed to interpret this definite description.

Knowledge necessary to interpret the definite descriptions ranges from textual to cultural, from specific to general.

What specific factors motivate speakers to choose a definite description in any given situation, to choose an expression indicating that a discourse entity is of low accessibility?

The definite article serves a variety of functions in discourse besides the earlier mentioned identifiability/familiarity. It also denotes:

- the discourse prominence of an entity,
- the entity's status as a role function,
- the fact that an entity is presented from a noncanonical point of view.

Discourse prominence

The definite article is used to evoke the interpretation that a discourse entity is highly prominent, e.g. that such entity plays a significant part in the broader discourse context. One instance of discourse prominence is the common literary strategy of making use of a definite description to introduce a significant entity at the commencement of a narrative, for the purpose of arousing the recipient's attention to that entity (e.g., the opening sentence of H.G. Wells's *The Invisible Man*: "*The stranger* came early in February", cited by Christophersen (1939: 29).

The subsequent example is a brief excerpt from a story about James Hall, a psychologist who has suffered a debilitating stroke and is now paralysed (New York Times Magazine, 18 August 1996, 22–24):

Hall has been thinking about God, psychiatry, analysis, fairy tales, dreams and *the monkey trap*.

The definite article in *the monkey trap* is used to introduce the entity that will be the central topic of concern in the immediately following discourse. Discourse entities are constructed through the use of definite descriptions, namely “role functions”.

Noun phrases here are used to refer to a fixed property, not to a particular individual. The use of definite descriptions to designate roles is illustrated through noun phrases in which the speaker has a choice between a definite and an indefinite article, as in the following passage about a boxing match:

Now Foreman's feet were planted. Now Moorer made *the big mistake*. His chin was on a straight line with Foreman's feared right. It came straight and true and Moorer never had a chance. (New York Times, 7 November 1994, p. B13)

The definite article in the italicised part of the sentence is employed to convey the idea that in any boxing match (or maybe in any sporting event), one participant typically makes a major mistake that cause him/her to lose the fight. *The big mistake* is employed to refer to a role in the frame representing our stereotypical knowledge of the events that characterize boxing matches.

Point of view

This function of the definite article is to contribute to shifts in point of view. Here all language is regarded as reflecting the point of view of the speaker or writer. Other perspectives are also possible, however, all languages are equipped with a wide range of formal mechanisms allowing to convey distinct points of view, including the definite article *the* as well. This section of the article will be devoted to the presentation of instances in which noun phrases with *the* demonstrate that a discourse referent is accessible from the noncanonical point of view. The example quoted below reflects the core function of the definite article *the*. It is the opening sentence of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*:

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across *the river* and *the plain* to *the mountains*.

The referents of these noun phrases with *the* are identifiable only to the narrator of the story, not to the readers. Similarly, unfamiliar uses of *the* in poetry can be interpreted as indicators of the narrator's point of view, in particular to depicting an entity as discourse prominent.

Another strategy, however slightly different, literary strategy makes use of the article to indicate that a portion of any text should be interpreted as describing point of view from a perspective of a discourse protagonist. This can be illustrated by another opening sentence of Hemingway's short story “Big Two-Hearted River”:

The train went on up *the track* out of sight, around one of the hills of burnt timber. Nick sat down.

As Chafe (1984: 284) indicates, “there is evidently no point in asking with whom the knowledge of the train or the track was judged to be shared”. These

entities are identifiable only to Nick, the character from this story, not to potential recipients of the story, namely readers. The definite articles in *the train* or *the track* possess the function indicating that this part of the discourse refers to the protagonist's (Nick's) point of view. This interpretation of the passage is favoured by the pragmatic context of the occurrence of definite descriptions in the first sentence whose referents are not accessible to the addressee as well as the immediate inclusion of Nick at the beginning of the second sentence.

Conclusions and implications for future studies

Concluding the above considerations and summing up the brief characteristics of the main assumptions related to previous theories of *the* and two theories coined by Ariel (1990) and Fauconnier (1994), we may state that the definite article is a marker of low accessibility. It is apparently a discourse processing instruction which signals that the means for interpreting the NP in which it occurs is available in the configuration of mental spaces. As long as the appropriate spaces, elements and connections can be constructed by the recipient, its selection is dependent on referent construction, hearers are induced by speakers. Hearers subsequently construct discourse referents to accept the referents into the discourse. Speakers, on the other hand, employ the article to achieve specific communicative goals in local communicative contexts.

Here we may refer to speaker-oriented approach vs. hearer-oriented approach (hearer-orientation originates from Hawkins 1978). Hearer-oriented approaches emphasize that relevant use of *the* is dependent not only on the speaker's referential intent but on the speaker's assessment of the hearer's knowledge of the referent. If the speaker believes the hearer cannot identify the referent, *the* should not be selected.

In contrast to hearer-oriented approach speakers do not simply select article in a relatively passive way, responding chiefly to what they think hearers know. Speakers often choose, as the examples provided here demonstrate, *the* even when they know that the hearer is not able to pick out the referent in question.

Article selection is a matter of the active, dynamic process of referent construction, in which speakers use discourse referents in such a way as to encourage hearers to accept the referents into the discourse under apparent intentions.

The content of the article is a brief attempt to comprise the account of the meaning and distribution of the definite article *the* in English. It is believed that the notions of *identifiability* and *familiarity* should be described more profoundly. In addition, such terms as *low accessibility* and *discourse prominence* must be analyzed in-depth as well. The author of the article is convinced that the concept of accessibility is worth studying because it possesses an advantage over the previous quoted approaches. And finally, the theoretical grounds provided in this article constitute a perfect foundation for a more detailed study of all uses of the definite article, for instance corpus-based study, which will be conducted in the upcoming future. It will certainly provide much more relevant sources to study the core meaning of the definite article.

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Teoretyczne rozważania nad przedimkiem określonym *the***Streszczenie**

Celem tego artykułu jest teoretyczne studium nad potencjalnym znaczeniem przedimka określonego "the", który jest często źle rozumiany przez nie-natywnych studentów, co powoduje jego późniejsze błędne użycie. W celu ułatwienia zrozumienia tego trudnego determinanta i składnika grupy wyrazów funkcyjnych, zostaną postawione następujące pytania: do jakiego stopnia przedimek określony posiada swoje standardowe znaczenie, jak daleko jego znaczenie może być rozszerzone i rozumiane, jak również jeżeli może być rozumiane, to czy istnieją jakieś ograniczenia w tym zakresie?

Artykuł odnosi się również do studiów teoretycznych w relacji do szeroko rozumianej semantyki przedimka określonego dotyczącej jego potencjalnego użycia, jego braku lub szerokiego użycia w różnych frazach rzeczownikowych i kontekstach zawierających ten przedimek (np. ang. *The tiger is dangerous* vs. *The tigers are dangerous*), ale artykuł będzie obejmował również różne, liczne przykłady innych zastosowań tego przedimka.

Szerokie zastosowanie przedimka określonego opiera się na wielu przykładach. Przykłady będą podane w relacji do interpretacji wielu wybitnych i szanowanych naukowców, którzy zajmują się ogólnie pojętym językoznawstwem. Ponadto, krótki opis znaczenia dostępnych teorii na temat użycia 'the' będzie przedstawiony w tym artykule. Ten opis będzie skonstruowany z analizami przeprowadzonymi przez uczonych, których wyniki nawiązują do trochę innego aspektu językoznawstwa, mianowicie językoznawstwa kognitywnego. Wszystkie te analizy zostaną przedstawione w kolejnych podrozdziałach tego artykułu.

Słowa kluczowe: znaczenie, użycie, przedimek określony, funkcje