**­­ Definite Articles and Their Uses: Diversity and Patterns of Variation[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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1. **Introduction**

One of the basic assumption of structuralism (cf. Lazard, 2012), viz. the assumption of the sign as an inseparable union of acoustic image and concept (*signifiant* vs. *signifié*) has generally been abandoned in linguistics, especially in comparative and typological studies. Only through this change in the theoretical foundations of linguistics has it become possible to base the comparison of languages also on notional criteria and to compare the different ways in which specific meanings are encoded in languages. In the domain under discussion, i.e. definite articles, we can base a comparison both on suitable formal criteria and investigate different meanings and uses of comparable forms (constituents of noun phrases preceding or following a noun, etc.) and on notional criteria like ‘definiteness’ and investigate the different ways of encoding this notion. In further illustration of the second approach, let me briefly mention that the list of formal properties that have been enumerated as markers of definiteness includes the following: word order, sentential stress, adnominal pronouns, case, number marking, aspect and topic markers. Both of these approaches and their combination require, however, clear definitions and explications of their basic terms ‘definite article’ and ‘definiteness’

 The goal of this paper is to provide the basic outlines of a typological study of definite articles, on the basis of both formal and notional criteria, with a focus on European languages. In contrast to earlier contributions to this topic (Krámský, 1972; Nocentini, 1996) and to

recent, more comprehensive typological studies (Dryer, 2005, 2015), more attention will be paid to the problems of (a) providing a clear semantic basis for the comparison and to (b) the reconstruction of plausible historical developments.

**2. Definition, identification, establishing comparability**

Definite articles have traditionally been identified and described for modern European (Germanic, Romance, Cektic, Basque, Hungarian, Bulgarian) and for Semitic languages. Moreover, emergent articles can be found in the periphery of Europe, i.e. Finnish (Chesterman, 1991), Sorbian and Polish. In fact, definite articles are often considered to be one of the most characteristic features of Europe as a linguistic area (cf. Haspelmath, 2001). The relevant grammatical category was absent, however, in earlier stages of Indo-European languages, with the exception of Classical Greek. Typological studies have recently shown that something like definite articles is also found elsewhere (in Central Africa, Meso-America and perhaps also in the Pacific). On the basis of his rich collections of data, M. Dryer (2005) has therefore provided a comprehensive description of the diversity found in the forms and uses of definite articles in the world (Dryer, 2005; 2015). In one of his contributions to the *World Atlas of Linguistic Structures* (chapter 37), he identifies definite articles cross-linguistically on the basis of the following syntactic criteria:

1. **Syntactic criteria:**

Definite articles are free or bound morphemes, constituents of NPs/DPs, derived but different from adnominal demonstratives, typically forming an opposition with indefinite articles; they cannot occur on their own (i.e. they cannot be a head in the traditional sense of the term) (Dryer, 2005: 154).

These formal criteria are clearly applicable to the invariant pre-nominal article in English (*the*), to the definite articles in French, which inflect for gender (*le*, *la*) and number (*les*) and the definite articles in German, which inflect for gender (*der*, *die*, *das*), for number (*die*) and for case (*der*, *des*, *dem*, *den*, etc,). They also apply to the post-posed articles of Scandinavian (-*en*), of Bulgarian (–*ta*, -*to*, -*te*), Romanian (-*ul*, -*a*, etc.) and Basque **(-***a*, -*ak*).

Dryer’s semantic criteria, by contrast, are much more general and less restrictive:

1. **semantic criteria:**

Definite articles encode ‘definiteness’ and have at least an anaphoric use, i. e. they can have the same referent as an antecedent found in a preceding sentence or text.

This definition and the typology it underlies have been criticized as being too broad and too vague and as being therefore applicable to languages which do not meet the criteria generally subsumed under the terms definiteness, such as ‘uniqueness’, ‘familiarity’ and ‘inclusiveness’ (cf. Davis et al. 2014). In a more elaborate follow-up article to the brief general sketch required by the WALS format, Dryer explains that he wanted to uncover a wider diversity in the use of definite articles than is shown in earlier descriptions and to show that languages with a binary contrast between definite and definite articles of the sort found in English are uncommon outside of Europe and the Middle East.

As already mentioned, the scope of my paper is limited to European languages. Its goal is to establish more solid semantic foundations for a comparative study of definite articles and to reconstruct the development of these expressions on the basis of available data and plausible processes of semantic change and grammaticalization. The implementation of these goals will also lead to a fine-grained typology of definite articles and ultim

ately provide a better basis for extending the scope to the specific articles of Polynesian languages (cf. Mosel & Hovdhaugen, 1992; Moyse-Faurie, 1997) and to other systems discussed in Dryer (2015).Moreover, even in the restricted area of Europe there is a remarkable diversity in the useof definite articles.

The concept‘definiteness’ that is used in the label for the relevant class of functional expressions is by no means a basic or primitive concept and therefore in need of explication. Using this label in the analysis of articles does not say much more than that an expression of a specific language is translated by the definite article *the* in English. Various attempts to explicate this notion in terms of more elementary ones can be found in philosophical studies (B. Russel, 1905; Frege; Neale, 1990;) in linguistic studies such as Hawkins (1978) and, more recently, in formal semantic studies such as Elbourne, (2010) and Gisborne (2012). This is not the place for a detailed discussion of the relevant formalisms. So let me just point out that the more elementary notions used in the relevant explications are the following: ‘uniqueness’, ‘salience’, ‘existence’ and ‘inclusiveness’. Of these elementary notions, ‘uniqueness’ is the most important one. Whenever we use a definite article as in (1), we presuppose that reference is made to an object or entity, that is unique and therefore clearly identifiable in a given context:

(1)a. Pourriez-vous me passer le sucrier?

 b. Votre tante est-elle malade?

 c. Le livre que vous avez acheté hier a été sevèrement critiqué dans le *Monde*.

An additional criterion of salience is important for those cases where several objects meet the decription ‘tante’ in (1b) or ‘livre que vous avez achté’ in (1c). In those cases it has been shown that interlocutors look for another property that distinguishes one entity from the others. Furthermore, in nearly all cases where a unique object is referred to there is also a presupposition of existence. Nevertheless, it is possible to construct examples where this presupposition is not met, e.g. in examples like the following, where a book has been written by two authors, so that there is no ‘seul auteur’:

(2) Houellebecq n‘est pas le seul auteur de *La vie en rose*.

The criterion of ‘inclusiveness’ or ‘exhaustivity’ is relevant for plural contexts, where the definite article is quite similar to universal quantifiers like *tous*. A request like (3) would generally be meant to include all the cushions outside:

(3) Il pleut. Pourriez-vous remporter les cuissons de la jardin!

Since plural contexts pose additional problems, we will not consider them any further in what follows. Nor will we considersuch quantificaltional use as are exemplified by (4), where the definite article is in the scope of the quantifier *chaque*:

(4) La mère de chaque enfant était présent au depart des elêves.

For all of the concepts discussed above there are precise formal explications in the relevant literature, in some cases controversial in their details. In summary, we can say that it is the notion of ‘uniqueness’, which is not asserted but presupposed by definite articles, that is the most important ingredient of their meaning. This assumption of uniqueness guarantees that the referent is identifiable for the interlocutor. In the terminology of pragmatics, more specifically in the view of Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson. 1996), definite articles “come with a guarantee of identifiability”.

 Given this requirement of uniqueness in a given context, let us now consider the various ways in which a context may identify a unique object. The most important contextual types are described in the following list:

(5) presupposition of **uniqueness** and identifiability in a certain context**:**

1. identification through in the situation of speech or universe of discourse (situational use)
2. identification through sufficient description (cataphoric)
3. identification by preceding context (anaphoric use)
4. identification through appeal to personal memory, partial description (employ mémoriel)
5. identification by association with an identifiable entity (associative use)

These different ways of contextually identifying the referent of a definite article can be illustrated by the following examples:

(6)a. Le soleil brille aujourd’hui. Le Pape va venir à Paris.

 b. Quelqu’un a volé mon vélo et j’ai reconnu le voleur.

 c. Le livre que j’avais acheté il y a six mois a obtenu le Prix Nobel.

 d. Vous vous souvenez: Nous étions au restaurant hier, quand vous m’a déjà pose la questions.

 e. Nous sommes allé regarder la voiture. Les phares étaien toujours allumés.

These are the 5 context types most frequently distinguished in the literature (cf. Hawkins, 1978; Löbner, 1985; Himmelmann, 1998; De Mulder & Carlier, 2011). In (5) and in (6) they are listed in the ordered of their plausible historical development. The most basic way in which a referent might be unique and thus identifiable is its presence in the context of speech (cf. (1a), (6)a). A slight extension of this domain of identification then leads to referents that are unique in a universe of discourse: the Pope, the sun, the government, the weather, etc. We know that there are many suns in the universe, but there is only one that is of interest in the context of our weather. A dedicated militant of a political party will simply speak of ‘the party’, whenever makes reference to his own group and can even give that identification a high scalar value by stressing the definite article (*THE* [ði:] *party*). In the anaphoric and cataphoric uses of the definite articles the referents are given in the co-text, in the preceding co-text for anaphoric reference (cf. (6b)) and in the following co-text for cataphoric reference (cf. (6c)). Note that definite descriptions, i.e. the identification of a referent through a description of its salient properties is simply regarded here as an instance of cataphora. The emploi mémoriel requires a search in the memory of interlocutors rather than in the co-text or the non-verbal context. According to Himmelmann (1997), this use of demonstratives has played the decisive role in the development of the definite article. A characteristic feature of this use is the explicit appeal to the hearer to search for the relevant context in his/her memory. Finally, the associative use requires a bridging context (cf. Clark & Marshall, 1981). In this case a referent is identifiable through its association with another one given in a context. There are many relations between entities that provide such a bridge: ‘part – whole’ (as in (6e)) or ‘action – instrument’, as in examples like the following:

(7) Notre voisin a été tué. Le couteau a été retrouvé pas loin d’ici.

**3. Origin and historical development**

Let us now consider in how far the preceding ordering of relevant context for the use of definite articles has historical relevance and squares with the historical evidence provided by relevant data. There is clear historical evidence and general agreement that definite article – at least in Europe – derive from adnominal demonstratives. This development is a younger phenomenon, only Greek had articles among the ancient languages of Europe. Right from the start we must admit, though that the available historical information is limited and does not enable us to clearly reconstruct and document the relevant processes of granmaticalization, so that we partly have to rely on synchronic evidence.

 In his frequently cited paper J. Greenberg (1978) distinguished 3 stages in the development of definite articles from demonstratives:

|  |
| --- |
| Stage ∅ → stage I → stage II → stage III |
| Dem (+cl) → def. art. (+cl) → generic article (-cl ) → class marker |
| Dem (-cl) ) → def. art. (-cl) → generic article (-cl ) → noun marker |

**Table 1**

In Hawkins, (2004) and in Heine & Kuteva, (2006) this schema is further elaborated to include 4 stages. In our elaboration of these schemata we will distinguish five stages, including the use of demonstratives as a separate stage and the development of specific articles in languages languages like Polynesian as a further development, whose details, however, are very clear. The following two hierarchies roughly characterize the co-evolution of form and meaning in the historical development of definite articles:

(8) demonstratives > strong article > weak article > generic article > specific article

The lables listed and ranked in (8) correspong to the following uses:

(9) exophoric/contrastive > endophoric (anaphoric/cataphoric) > associative > generic/abstract > specific

Let us now take a detailed look at labels and uses, at the relevant historical developments and at individual expressions manifesting a particular use. It is an essential property of demonstratives that they have an exophoric, pointing and a contrastive use; they can be used with a pointing gesture and identify entities in contrast to others (*I want this book* [gesture] *and not the other*.). Demonstratives of all syntactic and semantic types generally have anaphoric and cataphoric uses in addition to the exophoric one, too, but what is maintained in the latter two uses is the contrastive element (e.g. *Yesterday I bought a book and THIS book I will give to my mother*). So in the first stages of their development to articles, demonstratives do not only lose their exophoric, but also their contrastive meaning. That is exactly the reason why an anaphoric use is not a sufficient condition for using the term ‘definite article’ for the relevant expression.

There is good evidence for Romance languages that it is typically the distal demonstrative (Lat. *ille*, Engl. *that*) that gives rise to definite articles (Fr. *le*/*la*/*les*). Given, however, that demonstratives invariably also have an anaphoric use, it should not come as a surprise that some articles seem to be based more clearly on this anaphoric use. This is the case not only for those articles derived from Latin *ipse* (Catalan and Sardinian), but also for combinations like *ledit* in Middle French and all combinations of verbs of saying with demonstrative elements (Germ. *der erwähnte*. Engl. *the aforementioned*, etc.) or from verbs of saying alone (cf. De Mulder & Carlier, 2011). Mention must also be made in this connection that Fr. *ce* manifests the properties of the the first stages in the development of a demonstrative to a definite article. i.e. l’emploi anaphorique et l’emploi mémoriel (cf. De Mulder & Carlier, 2006).

The relevant step in the change from an exophoric to an anaphoric or cataphoric use is the fact that the search for a unique referent is transferred from an external situation to a search in the cotext, either preceding or following. Only of this change is accompanied by a loss of the contrastive meaning can we speak of an emergent article. In contrast to the anaphoric use, the cataphoric use, i.e. the relative clause following the demonstrative or article provides an identification via a description, a relative clause or any other nominal adjunct. In German, there are combinations of articles and distal demonstratives which clearly illustrate the transition from demonstrative to article in the cataphoric use (*der*-*jenige*, *die*-*jenige*). These forms are typically employed in cataphoric contexts, i.e. with a following relative clause, even though their anaphoric use is also marginally possible (*Diejenigen Studenten, die noch nicht bezahlt haben, möchten die bitte bald tun*. ‘Les étudiants, qui n’ont pas encore payé, sont pies de le faire le plus vite possible’).

The next stage in the development of definite articles involves a major step in the availability of a context for identification, from an external, situational or textual context to a more abstract context of association, of memorizing or of general availability in a universe of discourse. It is here that we find the associative and recogntional use (emploi mémoriel) of articles, as well as those cases where the cultural or local context provides a unique referent. The associative use (cf. (6e)) is often regarded as the crucial step in the development of a definite article, since this use is not available for demonstratives. In this domain beyond the anaphoric and cataphoric uses of demonstratives and articles, some languages (varieties of Low German, Frisian, Scandinavian, Standard German) draw a distinction between two types of definite articles: a strong one (pragmatic definiteness) and a weak one (semantic definiteness) (cf. Heinrichs, 1954; Ebert, 1970; Löbner, 1985; 2011; De Mulder & Carlier, 2011). On the basis of the available literature the distinction in the use of these two definite markers can roughly be described as follows:

1. The strong article manifests the situational use, the anaphoric one, including pseudo-anaphors (*Bill left. The fool had forgotten his money)*.
2. The weak article occurs in associative context, in reference to unique entities in the universe of discourse as well as in generic contexts.

In Standard German the regularities are somewhat more complex. The distinction of this kind shows up in connection with the fusion of definite articles and prepositions, subject to additional phonological constraints (*im*, *am*, *zum*, *vom*, *beim*, *zur*, *ins*), which is in contrast to the strong, non-fused form. The latter manifest the anaphoric and cataphoric uses, whereas the fused forms typical exhibit the associative use as well as the use related to unique referents given in the abstract universe of discourse and also occurs in generic sentences. In minimal pairs like the following, the weak article refers to an abstract institution, whereas the strong article refers to a specific building, similarly to the use vs. non-use of definite articles in English:

(10)a. Karl geht noch zur Schule. ‘Charles still goes to school’.

 b. Karl ging zu der Schule hin. ‘Charles went to the school building’

 c. Karl ist im Gefängnis. ‘Charles is (doing time) in prison’

 d. Karl ist jetzt im Gefängnis. ‚Charles is now inside the prison.‘

 The next step articles typically take in extending their use is the domain of abstract terms and of generic sentences. Note that all preceding examples were episodic sentences. French is a clear example of a language where generic sentences and expressions denoting abstract terms require the definite article, whereas this is only optional in German and unusual in English. In the abstract and generic use, reference is made to kinds and abstract entities:

(11)a. La solitude est difficile à supporter.

 b. (Die) Einsamkeit ist schwer zu ertragen. (German)

 c. Loneliness is difficult to live with. (English)

(12)a. Les faucons sont des oiseaux de proie.

 b. (Die) Falken sind Raubvögel.

 c. Falcons are predator birds.

For the final stage, i.e. the one that leads to specific articles, no convincing semantic reconstruction has been proposed sofar. The relevant articles in Polynesian languages, for example, are not only used for the introduction of a discourse referent – a use also found in literary texts of European languages – and for contexts where an indefinite article would be used in most European languages, but also for emphatic (contrastive) assertion of membership in a class in contrast to another (cf. Moyse-Faurie, 1997: East Uvean: *Ko te fafine ia, mole ko te tagata*. ‘It is a woman, not a man’). An analysis which sees specific articles a further development of definite articles as the are found in Europe has to assume that these articles have lost their essential property, i.e. the presupposition of uniqueness and have re-**acquired** the contrastive use of demonstratives. It is therefore not clear whether specific articles are really a further development of definite articles.

 Analogously to the labels and functions ordered in the two hierarchies (8) and (9), we can also now rank the relevant semantic changes (extension of contexts) as follows:

(13) exophoric > anaphoric > abstract context **>** generic, abstract **>** specific

 contrastive cataphoric universe of discourse contrastive category

 (suff. description) extension of context non-referential

 emploi mémoriel from co-text to abstract non-episodic contexts

 (loss of contrastive universe of discourse

 & exophoric use)

Sofar nothing has been said about a use found in some languages (Greek, Catalan, German), where definite articles are redundant, viz. their use with proper names. In Greek definite articles are not only used before proper names of people, but also together with place names with the names for planets, months, holidays, years, with geheric and abstract terms and even in combination with adnominal demonstratives. In German the use of articles in combination with some of these names is possible, but often involves a slight change of meaning. Most of these uses are excluded in English and in French[[2]](#footnote-2). Interestingly enough, the use of definite articles with proper names is excluded in Standard Basque, a language which completely excludes bare nominal phrases in argument positions (Etxebarria, 2014). For these and other reasons it can not be assumed that the redundant use of definite articles is the result of a further development at the right end of our scales. The development of totally redundant uses of definite articles cannot be analyzed as being part of a wide-spread chain of grammaticalization.

**4. Syntactice diversity in the use od definite articles**

After this brief sketch of semantic differentiations described in terms of grammaticalization let us now look at some of the most striking parameters of variation in the syntax of definite articles.

In the available typological surveys (Krámský, 1972; Lyons, 1999; Dryer, 2005) the following parameters of variations are invariably mentioned: availability of articles, one or two, free form or affix; interaction with morphological categories; delimitation from demonstratives. More detailed studies on individual phenomena have additionally revealed the following insights:

4.1. Multiple use of definite articles in nominal phrases is found inter alia in Albanian, Modern Greek, Yiddish, Romanian, Arabic, Scandinavian, Bavarian (cf. Plank, 2003). This multiple occurrence is connected with the normal and special ordering of adjectives. In French superlatives require a double use of the definite article (*L’étudiant, le plus intelligent*…).

Modern Greek (Joseph & Philippaki-Warburton 1987: 51f.)

(14)a. i kondés fústes ‘the short skirts’

 b. I fústes i kondés

 the skirts the short

 c. i kondés i fústes ‘the short skirts’

4.2. Cooccurrence with demonstratives, possessives or both is found inter alia in languages like the following: Mod. Greek, Hungarian, Chamicuro (Amazonian), Polynesian, Tîrî (Melanesian), Abkhaz, Guarani, Italian) (cf. Haspelmath, 1999). This double marking of definiteness seems to be connected with the time of developing the definite article.

(15) Ho perduto la mia giacca. ‘J’ai perdu mon veston.’

4.3. Differential/extended use with respect to semantic context (generic, mass, deixis, proper nouns). As already pointed, out languages differ with respect to the extension of their use to certain contexts. From a synchronic perspective we can rank languages according to the frequency with which definite articles are used, since there are more or less clear subset relations for restrictions on the omission of the definite article (cf. Longobardi, 1994, 2001; Dahl, 2004; Behrens, 2005), which for some languages yields roughly the following hierarchy:

 (16) Greek > Basque > French, Hungarian > German > English

4.4. Use inside of adpositional phrases (Himmelmann, 1998)

As pointed out by Himmelmann (1998) definite articles are more rare in prepositional phrases than in noun phrases. This can clearly be demonstrated for languages like the following: Romanian, Albanian, Tagalog, Bantu, Germanic, locative or temporal nouns in Polynesian languages. Such tendencies can also be observed in the specific constructions in many European language. Himmelmann offers an historical explanationfor this asymmetry: Definite articles develop relatively late and the article-less syntax of propsitional phrases is retained.

 Fine-grained comparisons between European languages clearly reveal such asymmetries, but the differences tend to be construction-specific and no generalizations are possible even across genealogically related languages. Here are a few examples concerning French, German and English:

SMELL (English = German ≠ **French**)

(17)a. This smells of cow, cat, cabbage, flowers

 b. Das riecht nach Kuh, Katze, Kohl, Blumen

 c. Ça sent la vache, le chat, le choux, bon les fleurs

MANNER OF MOTION (English = French ≠ **German**)

(18)a. go by train/bus/plane/boat/on foot

 b. mit dem Zug/Auto/Fahrrad/Flugzeug/Schiff..reisen/fahren; zu Fuß;

 c. aller à pied/en vélo/voiture/bateau/avion

INSTITUTIONS[[3]](#footnote-3) (**English** ≠ German = French)

(19)a. go to school/church/work/hospital/prison

b. zur Schule/Kirche/Arbeit/ins Krankenhaus/Gefängnis gehen

c. aller á l’école, l’église, au travail, à l’hôpital, en prison

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS (variation within English)

(20)a.­­ play the piano/guitar/flute/saxophone/trombone (British English)

 b. play piano/guitar/flute/violine (American English).

In cases like the preceding we enter the domain of non-referential uses of definite articles, which may, therefore, often be omitted.

**6. Summary and Conclusion**

Definite articles made their first appearance in European languages around the turn of the first millennium. What exactly triggered this development of demonstratives is discussed controversially in the relevant literature, but it is quite plausible to assume that both their semantic and syntactic properties were involved in their development and grammaticalization. Leiss (2000) argues that it was the loss of aspectual distinctions and case inflection in Early Germanic that led to emergence of definite articles. Quantificational distinctions expressed in some languae by case distictions (partitive vs. accusative) or by verbal prefixes can be transferred to article systems. As far as their syntax is concerned articles are structure-builders, since they occur at the periphery of a nominal phrase, either before or, more rarely following all other constituent of a noun phrase. Once we come across an article as hearers, we know that the relevant constituent is a noun phrase Hawkins (2004: 76ff.).

 The main goal of this paper to discuss the diversity in syntax, meaning and use of definite article across languages, with a specific areal focus on Europe. It was shown that that such comparative studies need to have clear semantic foundations, which can be provided by formal explications of such notions as uniqueness, salience, existence and exhaustiveness, traditionally known to play a role in the semantic analxsis of definite articles. On the basis of such a comparative basis it is possible to reconstruct the historivcal development of definite articles and to distinguish different types. In addition to manifesting a variety of syntactic differences across languages, definite articles were also shown to differ strikingly in their use.

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1. Johan van der Auwera, to whom this article is dedicated, successfully applied for a Humboldt fellowship in 1984/85which he intended to spend at the University of Hannover working with me. Unfortunately, I was invited to spend a year at the NIAS as fellow-in-residence the very same year. In spite of these difficulties we managed to initiate a fruitful cooperation leading to many joint projects and piblications. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In French place names can only combine with the definite article if they are followed by a relative clause (*Le Paris que j’avais connu* *il y a vingt ans*…) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Detailled corpus studies of variation in the use oft the definite article across regional and textual varieties of English can be foiund in recent publications be M. Hundt (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)