

Different Types of Definites Crosslinguistically

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Abstract

Definite descriptions constitute a core device for managing reference in natural language, and their semantics has been explored in great detail within formal approaches. There also is a rich descriptive literature on crosslinguistic phenomena concerning definites, but the theoretical literature has only recently begun to incorporate a wider range of languages and phenomena in this realm. The present paper provides an illustrative overview of some of the recently discussed crosslinguistic phenomena, focusing on languages that differentiate between different types of definites (namely German, Fering, Akan, Mauritian Creole, Lakhota, Hausa, and Haitian Creole) and the theoretical views that seem to capture the two types most straightforwardly: one type of definite, involving ‘weak articles’, is based on uniqueness, whereas ‘strong article’ definites crucially involve an anaphoric link. The contrast extends to so-called bridging uses in interesting ways, and the fact that there is a striking resemblance in the contrast across typologically unrelated languages points to a fundamental distinction that natural languages can utilize in organizing their referential system. The paper closes with an outlook on directions for future research.

1 Introduction

The class of expressions counting as definites can be construed in various ways. On an intuitive level, mainly based on a basic notion of reference, it can be taken to include at least definite and possessive descriptions (*the / his table*), pronouns (*he, she, it*), demonstratives (*this, that*), and proper names (*John*). Linguistic tests for definiteness may encompass an even larger class. Milsark’s (1977) test using existential constructions (Milsark, 1977), which are argued to disallow definites, is a case in point.

- (1) a. *There is {the / his / that / every} dog in my garden.
- b. *There is {he / this / that / John} in my garden.

Whatever the exact range of expressions that count as being definite, definite descriptions undoubtedly constitute a (if not THE!) core case. This paper focuses on them and provides a tour of sorts of some cross-linguistic phenomena that have started to enter the theoretical debate in the recent literature.¹

Definite descriptions have certainly received a fair share of attention in various lines of research on language, starting - in modern times at least - with the famous controversy in philosophy of language between Russell (1905) and Strawson (Strawson, 1950), and continuing in current philosophical, linguistic, and psycho-linguistic research. Instead of recounting the relatively familiar theoretical debates in this realm in depth, the discussion here will mostly focus on less well-known phenomena (at least amongst theorists working within formal frameworks for analyzing meaning), specifically the fact that many languages have two forms for definite articles that differentiate between two different types of definiteness.² In other words, where - from the perspective of English - we might have suspected one unified notion based on *the*, it seems like natural language at least has the option to draw systematic distinctions between different types of definites (so much for the notion of THE definite article!). The lines drawn by these contrasting forms across many of these languages largely seem to correspond to one another, suggesting a rather fundamental and language-general distinction that would seem crucial to capture within a theory of definite descriptions. And indeed, the two sides of that line suggested by these distinctions happen to map quite naturally onto two of the most prominent traditions of analyses of definites, based on uniqueness and anaphoricity.

2.2 Two Theories of Definite Descriptions

The question of what definite descriptions contribute to the meaning of utterances has been answered in a number of different ways in the literature. There are two main lines of thought that have been particularly prominent, however, which can be subsumed under the labels of uniqueness and familiarity, and I will focus on them.³ They can be seen as taking something along the lines of Hawkins’ situational and anaphoric uses, respectively, as their starting point, and then trying to extend their approach to the other uses.

2.2.1 Uniqueness

Uniqueness approaches build on the intuitive insight that we use definite descriptions to refer to things that have a role or property that is unique (relative to some contextual domain), and can thus be picked out with the appropriate description, e.g., *the king of France* or *the sun*. In terms of semantic representations in predicate logic, this uniqueness condition is standardly expressed as follows:

- (3) $\exists x.[P(x) \ \& \ \forall y[P(y) \rightarrow y = x]]$
‘There is an x that is P and all y that are P are identical to x ’

The tradition following Russell (1905) sees definite descriptions of the form *the P* as quantifiers along exactly these lines. Uniqueness-based accounts in the tradition of Frege (1892) and Strawson (1950), on the other hand, hold that definite descriptions denote individuals (i.e., that their semantic type is e) and see the uniqueness condition as a precondition for the felicitous use, or a presupposition, of definite descriptions.

One major challenge for all uniqueness-based accounts is that there clearly are many felicitous and true examples involving definite descriptions whose descriptive content is true of more than one individual in the world. For example, if (4) is said in a lecture hall containing exactly one projector, there is no problem whatsoever in talking about this projector by using the definite description *the projector*, even though there are many other projectors in the world (including, for example, the ones in the adjoining lecture halls).

- (4) The projector is not being used today.

This raises what is often called the problem of incomplete descriptions. Perhaps the most common line of dealing with it is to allude to a notion of contextual domain restriction: A given context of utterance will further narrow the extent to which uniqueness has to hold, e.g., by providing an implicitly understood additional predicate C , so that all that the uniqueness condition requires is that there be a unique individual that is both P and C , or by interpreting P relative to a limited domain of the world, e.g., in terms of situations. While this might seem ad-hoc if it were only of use for definites, a case can be made that the exact same phenomenon can be found with a variety of other expressions, especially quantifiers like *every* (Even when we say *everyone came to the party*, we surely don’t mean **everyone**; see Neale, 1990, for a particularly clear discussion of this parallel).

2.2.2 Familiarity and Anaphoricity

The second major approach to analyzing definite descriptions, usually associated with the label of familiarity, was introduced into the modern discussion by Heim (1982) and Kamp (1981) (building on Christophersen (1939)). It is based on the idea that they serve to pick out referents that are in some sense familiar to the discourse participants. While the literature is not always clear on what it takes for an individual to count as familiar, Roberts (2003) distinguishes two kinds of familiarity (see also Prince, 1981, for a similar distinction). The broader notion of ‘weak familiarity’, which arguably corresponds (for the most part) to Heim’s (1982) understanding of the term, allows for a number of ways in which something can be familiar, e.g., by being perceptually accessible to the discourse participants, via contextual existence entailment, or by being ‘globally familiar in the general culture’ (Roberts, 2003, p. 304). In much of the literature following Heim (1982), however, the focus was on what Roberts (2003) calls ‘strong familiarity’, which essentially requires a definite to be anaphoric to a preceding linguistic expression. Example (2a), used above to illustrate Hawkins’ anaphoric use, is such a case, of course.

- (2a) John bought **a book** and a magazine. **The book** was expensive

As we already noted, the definite *the book* in (2a) is clearly intended to pick out the very same book that was introduced with the indefinite *a book* in the first sentence. In modern linguistic work, approaches in this tradition, such as dynamic semantics (Heim, 1982; Groenendijk and Stokhof, 1990; Chierchia, 1995) and Discourse Representation Theory (Kamp, 1981; Kamp and Reyle, 1993, and much work following them) provide various proposals for implementing familiarity (or anaphoricity) formally by encoding the relationship between an anaphoric definite and its antecedent directly in the semantics.

3 Examples from Germanic

Let us now begin our survey of some of the cross-linguistic phenomena involving definites. The first detailed discussion of Germanic dialects with two forms for definite articles that I am aware of dates back to (Heinrichs, 1954), who discusses dialects of the Rhineland (see also Hartmann, 1967). Other dialects for which this phenomenon has been described include the Mönchen-Gladbach dialect (Hartmann, 1982), the Cologne dialect (Himmelmann, 1997), Bavarian (Scheutz, 1988; Schwager, 2007) and Austro-Bavarian (Brugger and Prinzhorn, 1996; Wiltschko, 2011), Viennese (Schuster and Schikola, 1984), Hessian (Schmitt, 2006), and, perhaps the best documented case, the Frisian dialect of Fering (Ebert, 1971a,b).⁴ A parallel phenomenon is also present in standard German, although here the contrast is only present in particular morphological environments (Hartmann, 1978, 1980; Haberland, 1985; Cieschinger, 2006; Waldmüller, 2008; Schwarz, 2009). As Fering and German are the best documented cases, I will use them to illustrate the core phenomena.

3.1 Fering and German

Fering (as well as many of the German dialects for which this phenomenon has been documented), has two full-fledged paradigms for the two forms of the definite article. In standard German, on the other hand, the contrast between the two forms is only reflected in cases where a definite can contract with a preceding preposition (on variation in the extent to which such contractions are possible in standard written German, see Eisenberg et al., 1998; Schwarz, 2009). Both cases are illustrated below.

(5) **The definite article paradigms in Fering (from Ebert, 1971b) and German**

	Fering				German
Article Type	m.Sg.	f.Sg	n.Sg.	Pl.	Preposition + Def
weak (Ebert's A-form)	a	at	at	a	vom
strong (Ebert's D-form)	di	det (jü)	det	dön (dö)	von dem

- (6) a. *Ik skal deel tu a / *di kuupmaan.*
 I must down to the_{weak} / the_{strong} grocer
 'I have to go down to the grocer.'
- b. *Oki hee an hingst keeft. *A / Di hingst haaltet.*
 Oki has a horse bought the_{weak} / the_{strong} horse limps
 'Oki has bought a horse. The horse limps.'

(Ebert, 1971b, p. 161)

- (7) a. *Hans ging zu dem Haus.*
 Hans went to the_{strong} house
 'Hans went to the house.'
- b. *Hans ging zum Haus.*
 Hans went to-the_{weak} house
 'Hans went to the house.'

(Schwarz, 2009)

In order to have a uniform terminology across languages, I will use the terms 'weak article' and 'strong article' for the corresponding forms in all the languages and dialects discussed here (see also Schwager, 2007). For the time being, a uniform terminology should primarily be seen as a convention of convenience, and not as pre-judging the phenomena to indeed be completely identical cross-linguistically. That being said, the overwhelming parallels across languages seem to justify starting out with such a unified terminology.

Having introduced the basic contrast between two forms of definite articles, we will now turn to the crucial question of how these two forms differ in their meaning and use. All in all, a relatively clear mapping emerges from the data, between strong articles and anaphoric uses on the one hand and weak articles and uniqueness-based situational uses on the other hand.

3.1.1 Anaphoric Uses of the Strong Article

The existing literature generally agrees that (what is here called) the strong article is the appropriate form for anaphoric uses. In fact, the most common characterization of the contrast between the weak and strong articles that is found in the literature locates the difference between them in their ability to be used anaphorically (as well as demonstratively; see below). The following representative quote from Hartmann summarizes this view (see also Eisenberg et al., 1998; Krifka, 1984; Ebert, 1971b; Haberland, 1985; Scheutz, 1988, among others, for similar characterizations):⁵

The differences between the described formal properties of contracted forms [weak articles; FS] and full forms [strong articles; FS] correspond to differences in the way definite descriptions have been introduced into the textual context: full forms of the *der*-article are used as anaphoric and deictic elements, contracted forms in definite expressions are primarily used non-anaphorically.

(Hartmann, 1980, p. 180)

The view of anaphoricity in this literature is generally based on the intuition that for a definite to be anaphoric, its meaning has to be dependent on the interpretation of a previously occurring (and typically indefinite) noun phrase, i.e., it appeals to a notion of strong familiarity.⁶ Ebert's (1971a) Fering example below illustrates a basic case:

- (8) *Peetje hee jister an kü₁ slaachtet. Jo saai, **det** kü₁ wiar äi sünj.*
 Peetje has yesterday a cow slaughtered. One says **the_{strong} cow** was not healthy
 'Peetje has slaughtered a cow yesterday. One says **the cow** was not healthy.'

(Fering, Ebert, 1971a, p. 107)⁷

About such anaphoric uses of the strong article, she writes, 'The communicative function of the definite article is to signal familiarity of the referent. In contrast to German, the D-article in Fering additionally indicates that the referent is identifiable by means of linguistic specification.' (Ebert, 1971a, p. 107)

The standard German example in (9) furthermore shows that uniqueness plays no immediate role for strong article definites.

- (9) *In der New Yorker Bibliothek gibt es ein Buch über Topinambur. Neulich war ich dort und*
 In the New York library exists EXPL a book about topinambur. Recently was I there and
habe #im / in dem Buch nach einer Antwort auf die Frage gesucht, ob man
 have **in-the_{weak} / in the_{strong} book** for an answer to the question searched whether one
Topinambur grillen kann.
 topinambur grill can.

'In the New York public library, there is a book about topinambur. Recently, I was there and searched **in the book** for an answer to the question of whether one can grill topinambur.'

(Schwarz, 2009)

There surely are many books in the library, but the previous mention of the relevant book in the first sentence suffices to ensure a proper interpretation of the definite in the second sentence - as long as the strong article is used.

A similar point can be made with cases where the description of the anaphoric definite does not match the one in the antecedent phrase (10). It can even be an epithet (11), which arguably does not contribute any descriptive content to the truth-conditional interpretation of a sentence at all Potts (2005).

- (10) *Maria hat einen Ornithologen ins Seminar eingeladen. Ich halte #vom / von dem*
 Maria has an ornithologist to-the seminar invited. I hold **of-the_{weak} / of the_{strong} man**
Mann nicht sehr viel.
 not very much

‘Maria has invited an ornithologist to the seminar. I don’t think very highly of **the man**.’

- (11) *Hans hat schon wieder angerufen. Ich will #vom / von dem Idioten nichts mehr hören.*
 Hans has already again called. I want **of-the_{weak}** / **of the_{strong}** **idiot** not more hear.

‘Hans has called again. I don’t want to hear anything anymore from **that idiot**.’

(both examples from Schwarz, 2009)

There is ample evidence, then, that the strong article involves an anaphoric link of some sort, which is not present with the weak article, given its infelicity in the above examples (8-11).

3.1.2 The Weak Article and Situational Uniqueness Uses

Ebert (1971a) describes the use of the weak article definite in (12) as presupposing ‘that the intended dog does not need to be specified any further, because there is only one dog at the time and place of the speech act that could be meant’ (Ebert, 1971a, p. 83).

- (12) *A hünj hee tuswark.*
the_{weak} **dog** has tooth ache
 ‘**The dog** has a tooth ache.’

(Ebert, 1971a, p. 83)

This suggests that a crucial requirement of the weak article is that there be a unique referent fitting the description of the noun phrase (in the relevant domain of interpretation). As already noted above, this is in clear contrast with the strong article.

In terms of Hawkins’ classification, Ebert’s Fering example in (12) is a case of immediate situation uses. The example in (13) illustrates a larger situation uses, and (14) illustrates larger and global situation uses with the German weak article.

(13) **Larger Situation Use**

- A köning kaam to bischük.*
the_{weak} **king** came to visit
 ‘**The king** came for a visit.’

Fering (Ebert, 1971a, p. 82-83)

(14) **German**

a. **Larger Situation Use**

- Der Empfang wurde vom / #von dem Bürgermeister eröffnet.*
 The reception was **by-the_{weak}** / **by the_{strong}** **mayor** opened
 ‘The reception was opened by **the mayor**.’

b. **Global Situation Use**

- Armstrong flog als erster zum Mond.*
 Armstrong flew as first one **to-the_{weak}** **moon**
 ‘Armstrong was the first one to fly to **the moon**.’

(Schwarz, 2009)

In all of these cases, the weak-article definites refer to the unique individual that has the relevant property in a context of suitable size. One could characterize this by saying that they uniquely denote within a specific situation. In Ebert’s words, all these examples have in common ‘[...] that they can refer without further specification’, and show that the ‘A-article can also refer to objects that are not globally unique in certain cases, i.e., to ‘situationally unique objects’ (Ebert, 1971a, p. 71).

3.2 Bridging with the Weak and Strong Articles

While the mapping from anaphoric and uniqueness uses of the strong and weak articles to the theoretical approaches is fairly straightforward, it would seem less clear a priori what to expect for bridging uses. Interestingly, the class of bridging turns out to not show uniform behavior with respect to article choice. Cases that can be quite naturally construed as situational uses, e.g., because there is a part-whole relationship between an aforementioned entity and the referent of the definite in question, require the weak article. Uses that involve a relation (typically expressed by the head noun) which doesn't suggest a situational connection, on the other hand, such as that between a producer and a product, as it were, require the strong article. Both cases are illustrated for German and Fering below:

(15) German

a. **Part-Whole Relation**

Der Kühlschrank war so groß, dass der Kürbis problemlos im / #in
 The fridge was so big that the pumpkin without a problem **in-the_{weak}** / **in the_{strong}**
dem Gemüsefach untergebracht werden konnte.
 crisper stowed be could

‘The fridge was so big that the pumpkin could easily be stowed **in the crisper**.’

b. **Producer Relation**

Das Theaterstück missfiel dem Kritiker so sehr, dass er in seiner Besprechung kein gutes
 The play displeased the critic so much that he in his review no good
Haar #am / an dem Autor ließ.
 hair **on-the_{weak}** / **on the_{strong}** author left

‘The play displeased the critic so much that he tore **the author** to pieces in his review.’

(Schwarz, 2009)

(16) Fering

a. **Part-Whole Relation**

Wi foon a sark uun a maden faan't taarep. A törem stän wat skiaf.
 We found the church in the middle of the village **the_{weak} tower** stood a little crooked

‘We found the church in the middle of the village. **The tower** was a little crooked.’

Fering (Ebert, 1971a, 118)

b. **Producer Relation**

Peetji hee uun Hamboreg an bilj keeft. Di mooler hee ham an guden pris maaget.
 Peter has in Hamburg a painting bought **The_{strong} painter** has him a good price made.

‘Peter bought a painting in Hamburg. **The painter** made him a good deal.’

Fering (Karen Ebert, p.c.)

While a precise and complete characterization of the conditions that govern the use of weak vs. strong articles in bridging cases requires further discussion (and research), it is rather intriguing that the parallels in the distinction between the articles in German and Fering extends to these more intricate cases. As we will see in the following section, these parallels extend to non-Germanic languages as well. The key theoretical upshot of these bridging cases is that what is commonly called ‘bridging’ can be implemented by languages in more than one way.

4 Beyond Germanic

Turning now to examples outside of Germanic, we can distinguish at least two cases: on the one hand, there are languages that are fully parallel to Germanic in having two distinct overt forms to express definite articles. On the other hand, there are languages that have only one overt form that seems to correspond to the strong article in Germanic. Weak article definites are expressed by bare nominals in these languages. Mauritian Creole and Akan, which fall into the latter category and have been discussed in quite some detail in recent

work, will be discussed first. Next, I discuss languages that have two overt definite article forms, focusing on Lakhota and Hausa. Finally, another well-documented case that does not fit neatly into the cross-linguistic pattern we see in the other languages, namely Haitian Creole, is discussed to illustrate further potential for variation across languages.

4.1 Languages with Exclusively Anaphoric Articles

4.1.1 Akan

Akan (Kwa, Niger-Congo), has recently been argued to exhibit a contrast very similar to that found in German and Fering. The overt determiner *nó* is a strong article. Weak article definites are expressed with bare nominals. The strong article form also can serve as a pronoun (with slight shifts in tonal properties) and a ‘dependent clause marker’ (Arkoh and Matthewson, 2011). While a unified view of all three uses ultimately may seem both desirable and feasible, I will here focus on simple definites. Prior work on noun phrases in Akan (Fretheim and Amfo, 2008; Amfo, 2007; Saah, 1994) has argued for an analysis of *nó* in terms of unique identifiability, understood as a level on the Givenness Hierarchy (Gundel et al., 1993), but Arkoh and Matthewson (2011) argue for an analysis in terms of familiarity, generally along the lines of the analysis of the strong article in German put forth in Schwarz (2009) (though they expand the notion to cover certain cases that do not require a linguistic antecedent, an expansion that also seems necessary for a broader range of German data). (17) provides a basic illustration of an anaphoric use of *nó*:

- (17) a. *Mòtɔ-ɔ* *èkùtù bí*
 1sg.subj-buy-Past orange Ref
 ‘I bought a (certain) orange.’
- b. *Èkùtù nó* *yè dɛw déé*
 orange Fam be nice so
 ‘The orange is/was so nice.’

(Arkoh and Matthewson, 2011, p. 24)

Just as in German, uniqueness does not seem to be required in any way with the strong article. An example parallel to (9) illustrates this.

- (18) *Búùkùú bí wò Swédúr búùkùú kòrábíá hɔ áà ɔ-fà hyèmndònúm hw Nànsá yí*
 book Ref at Swedru library there Rel 3sg.subj-take hyèmndònúm self three.day this
mò-kɔ-ɔ hɔ kò-hwé-è búùkùú nó mù déè mó-hú déè wó-dzi
 1sg.subj-go-Past there go-look-Past book Fam in Comp 1sg.subj-see Comp 3pl-subj.eat
hyèmndònúm à
 hyèmndònúm P

‘At the Swedru library, there is a (certain) book about the leaf (hyèmndònúm). Recently I visited there to see if I find in **the book** that the leaf (hyèmndònúm) is edible.’

(Arkoh and Matthewson, 2011, p. 54)

Despite the obvious existence of many books in the relevant library, a simple strong-article definite *the book* does the job when the speaker is picking up an antecedent anaphorically. Also in parallel to German, the noun on the definite itself can be much more general than in the antecedent (cf. (10)).⁸

- (19) *Ámá tɔ-ò ñsá fré-è ñnòmàhwɛ́fɔ bí bá-à ñkyrèkyírɛ náásí.*
 Ama throw-Past hand call-Past birds.observer Ref came-Past teaching.Nom Poss.under
Mì-n-gyí pàpá nó ñ-dzí kitsikitsí
 1sg.subject-Neg-take man Fam Neg-eat small.Red

‘Ama invited a (certain) ornithologist to the seminar. I don’t trust **the man** in the least.’

(Arkoh and Matthewson, 2011, p. 52)

In absence of a clear antecedent in the discourse context, *nó* gives rise to infelicity (according to Becky’s judgment), such as in the following example, assuming a context where there has been no prior mention of a blacksmith:

- (20) *Kòfí hù-ù òtòmfo (#nú)*
Kofi see-Past blacksmith (**Fam**)

(Arkoh and Matthewson, 2011, p. 38-39)

While the bare nominal variant in this case gives rise to a simple existential interpretation (parallel to the English indefinite ‘a’), bare nominals can also express weak article definites, e.g., with globally unique entities:

- (21) *Ámstròŋ nyí nyímpá áà ó-dzí-ì kán tu-u kɔ-ò òsírán dɔ*
Armstrong is person Rel 3sg.subj-eat-Past first uproot-Past go-Past **moon** top

‘Armstrong was the first person to fly to **the moon**.’

(Arkoh and Matthewson, 2011, p. 39)

Turning to bridging examples, we find yet another parallel in that *nú* only can be used for certain types of bridging, which presumably are parallel to (15b) and (16b) in German and Fering above, such as (22):

- (22) *Ásáw nú yé-è òhín nú fèw árá mà ò-kyé-è òkyìréfú nú àdzí*
dance Fam do-Past chief Fam beautiful just Comp 3sg.subj-give-Past trainer **Fam** thing

‘The dance was so beautiful that the chief gave **the trainer** a gift.’

(Arkoh and Matthewson, 2011, p. 49)

Cases involving part-whole bridging, on the other hand, are not compatible with the strong article. These require a possessive determiner in Akan, rather than the null form.

- (23) *Yè-hù-ù dàn dádáw bí wò èkùrásí hɔ (ní) ñkyénsìdán (#nú / #bí) é-hódwòw*
1pl.subj-see-Past building old Ref at village there (**Poss**) roof (**Fam** / **Ref**) Perf-worn-out

‘We saw an old building in the village; (**its** / **#the** / **#a (certain)**) **roof** was worn out.’

(Arkoh and Matthewson, 2011, p. 46-47)

While Arkoh and Matthewson (2011) note a couple of interesting differences between German and Akan (concerning cases where a referent could count as either familiar or situationally unique, such as a family dog), the parallels emerging in these examples are rather striking, and strongly suggest that the contrast between weak and strong articles corresponds to a general fault line along which languages can align their referential system. Mauritian Creole constitutes yet another case in point in this regard.

4.1.2 Wespel 2008: Mauritian Creole

Mauritian Creole (MC), a French-based creole spoken on Mauritius, has a post-nominal clitic *la*, whose surface form obviously is taken from French. However, it seems to function much like the strong article in that it is standardly used for anaphoric reference:

- (24) *Enn garson ek enn tifi ti pe lager. Garson la ti paret an koler, tifi la ti res*
one boy and one girl PST PROG argue **boy** DEF PST appear in rage **girl** DEF PST stay
kalm.
calm

‘A boy and a girl were arguing. **The boy** seemed furious, **the girl** stayed calm.’

(Wespel, 2008, p. 143; source: B.N.1.75)

Cases corresponding to the weak article are generally expressed with a bare nominal (though these can also have existential, generic, and kind-level readings; Wespel, 2008, p. 141). Globally unique entities constitute one example, and what Wespel calls ‘complete functional descriptions’, i.e., descriptions with a functional head noun that appears with an overt relatum argument, also fall into this category:⁹

- (25) *Later turn otur soley.*
earth revolve around **sun**

‘**The earth** moves around **the sun**.’

(Wespel, 2008, p. 150; source: O.M.49.)

- (26) *Letah voler la vin swiy so sulye avek latet Kassim [...]*
 when thief DEF come wipe his shoe with head **Kassim**
 ‘When the thief was about to wipe his shoe on **Cassim’s head** [...]

(Baker, 1972, p. 173)

In addition to these simple referential uses, we also find cases of bridging, and again the parallel to German, Fering, and Akan is rather striking, as the exact same contrast seems to be present in MC:

- (27) *Mo fin visite enn lavil dan provins. Lameri ti pli ot ki legliz.*
 I ACC visit one village in province **town-hall** PST more high than **church**
 ‘I visited a village in the province. **The town hall** was higher than **the church**.’ (Wespel, 2008, p. 155; source: O.M.22.)
- (28) *Li fin kontan liv la ek aster li envi zwen loter la.*
 she PST love book DEF and now she want meet **author** DEF
 ‘She was fond of the book and now she wants to meet **the author**.’ ((Wespel, 2008, p. 156); source: O.M.2.8.)

While further data is needed to gain a more comprehensive comparative view of definites in MC and the weak and strong article definites in Germanic and Akan, it so far looks like we are dealing yet again with exactly the same contrast, up to the rather surprising parallels with different types of bridging definites. Given its relatively recent development as a Creole, MC may provide particularly valuable insights into the emergence of this type of definite system, especially given the obvious difference in meaning and use from its lexifier language French.

4.2 Languages with Two Articles

Turning to languages that have two overt forms expressing different types of definite articles, the available data is unfortunately somewhat more limited. I will discuss two such languages, Lakhota and Hausa, to illustrate the commonalities with the by now familiar contrast and point to some potential differences.

4.2.1 Lakhota

Lakhota has a definite article *kiŋ*, which is used to refer to globally unique entities such as the earth and the sky, which suggests that it’s a weak article:

- (29) *eya’ maḥpíya naŋ maḥhá kiŋ lená thōká-káǵa-pi k’uŋ hé eháŋ ma-tḥúŋ-pe ló*
 well sky and earth **the_{kiŋ}** dem.pl first.create.pass k’uŋ dem then I.born.pass ASSRT
 ‘Well, I was born at the time when **the sky and earth** were created.’

(O’Gorman, 2011)

O’Gorman (2011) also provides an example that he characterizes as a situational uniqueness use in Hawkins’s (1978) terms, although no elaborate context is provided, beyond noting that reference is being made in the text quoted to a unique axe present in the narrative discourse situation:

- (30) *tókša nazúŋspe kiŋ lé uŋ wa-káhúḥuǵiŋ kte,” eyá kéye’*
 eventually axe **the_{kiŋ}** dem.prox using 1sg-smash up IRR said QUOT
 ‘In due time I will smash it up with **the ax**’, she said.’

(O’Gorman, 2011, p. 10)

In addition to *kiŋ*, Lakhota also has another definite article, *k’uŋ*, which (Buechel, 1939, p. 97) characterizes as expressing ‘the above-mentioned’, as in the following examples:

- (31) *akí cita k’uŋ hēna*
 ‘**the soldiers** mentioned before’ (Buechel, 1939, p. 97)
- (32) *Wísimnaye k’uŋ he kaíyuzeya nájiŋ.*
 ‘**The (that) publican** stood afar off.’ (Buechel, 1939, p. 327)

While Buechel sees this as corresponding to English ‘that’, it’s clear that there are other demonstrative articles in Lakhota that correspond to ‘that’, and much of the subsequent literature characterizes *k’uŋ* as an anaphoric article, more or less in line with the characterization of the strong article above (Lyons, 1999; Krifka, 1984; Boas and Deloria, 1941). But note that there also are alternative accounts in terms of accessibility (O’Gorman, 2011) and topic discontinuity or switch reference (Curl, 1999).

Interestingly, in light of the phenomena in other languages discussed above, there also seems to be a contrast between different types of bridging corresponding to these two articles. One example involving part-whole bridging and using the weak article is the following:

- (33) *yaŋkǎŋ blé waŋ šmá glakíŋyaŋ ħpáya óhuta kiŋ él ináziŋ*
 then lake indef deep across.her.way lay shore the_{kiŋ} to stand
 ‘then a deep lake lay across her path. he stood at the shore.’

(O’Gorman, 2011)

The only case of bridging with the strong article that I have been able to find is interesting in that it also involves a part-whole relationship of sorts, at least on the material level. However, note that the English translation of the noun in question is relational (recall that relational nouns can facilitate strong-article bridging), and it’s not necessarily clear whether we regard leftovers as a proper part of the meal - one might want to say that they only become leftovers after the temporal extension of the meal has ended.

- (34) *ighúštarŋ naŋ heháŋl wikǎóškalaka kiŋ wóyapte č’uŋ hená wičhá-k’u ške’e*
 finish.a.meal and then young.women DEF leftovers DEF DEM.PL collect.gave QUOT
 ‘He finished his meal and then gave the leftovers to the young women.’

While more data is needed to evaluate these cases in comparison with the data from other languages, it seems at least possible at this point to see the contrasts between *kiŋ* and *k’uŋ* as corresponding to the contrast between weak and strong articles. In addition to the apparent parallels, there certainly are obvious differences that need to be noted. The most striking one is that (as in various other languages) both definite articles can attach to what seem to be clauses (Buechel, 1939), though perhaps at least in some cases, we might be dealing with nominalizations (O’Gorman, 2011). Furthermore, at least *kiŋ* can appear together with both personal and possessive pronouns (Buechel, 1939, pp. 322-323).

4.2.2 Hausa

Another language that has been reported to have two distinct definite articles is Hausa. Beyond making a distinction between two overt forms for definites, suffixal *-n* and *dīn*, however, it seems like Hausa also allows bare nominals to be interpreted definitely. But it is not entirely clear whether we are really dealing with a full three-way distinction. Let us begin by looking at examples of the two overt forms. Buba (1997) mentions the following contrast:¹⁰

Notice also that the definite determiner [-*n*; FS] is possible with a first (new) mention (but inferrable) referent, but not anaphoric *Fdī-n*, as in:

- (35) (A arrives in B’s place, and he first asks B):
yáyáa garí-n [#gáarii dī-n]?
 ‘how’s the town?’

If, however, there is a prior discussion of the town in question, then *Fdī-n* is perfectly permissible, e.g.:

- (36) (speaker asks addressee about his journey)
yáyáa gáarii dī-n [#gáarii-n]?
 ‘how’s the town [that you’ve visited]?’

(Buba, 1997, p. 43)

Jaggar (2001) characterizes the felicity conditions for the definite clitic *-n* as being tied to ‘the presumed unique identifiability of the constituent, [...], either because the referent has been previously mentioned in the discourse [...] or is context-inferable’ (Jaggar, 2001, p. 317).

The *dîn* form, on the other hand, which Jaggar describes as a morphologically complex combination of *dî* and the definite clitic *-n*, ‘is always hearer/discourse-old, and can never be simply context-inferable’ (Jaggar, 2001, p. 321). Interestingly, it can also occur with pronouns, possessives, and demonstratives, and ‘[c]onsonant-final nouns (usually loanwords) and unassimilated foreign words also use *dîn* as a definite determiner’ (Jaggar, 2001, p. 323) (i.e., in place of *-n*, presumably eliminating the contrast noted above).

In addition to the two overt forms, there also are cases where a bare nominal expresses a definite, in particular with globally unique entities such as the sun (*rānā*) and the moon (*watā*). Jaggar (2001) furthermore provides the following example:

- (37) *dà mukà jāvō tà mukà canjà tayà*
 ‘when we pulled it (the car) out we changed **the tyre.**’

Unfortunately, the available literature does not provide enough context for the various examples to relate these three possible forms of expressing definites to the phenomena discussed in other languages above in more detail, but there is at least suggestive evidence for parallels to the cases previously considered. Note also that Jaggar (1985) proposes an account of the various forms in terms of accessibility in the sense of Ariel (1990). Comparing such an account with the broader theoretical and cross-linguistic picture will be an interesting task for future work.

4.3 A Different Type of Contrast: Haitian Creole

I have tried to highlight the substantial and impressive parallels in contrasts between definites across various typologically unrelated languages. It is perhaps not too surprising that other languages can encode different contrasts between definites as well. One case in point is that of Haitian Creole (HC) Wespel (2008).

Similarly to MC, HC has a definite determiner *la* that occurs post-nominally (though unlike in MC, HC *la* has a number of formal variants based on morphological and phonological factors). Its range of uses is far greater, however, than in MC, and doesn’t seem to correspond in any straightforward way to the distinctions we have seen so far. In particular, HC *la* is used both for cases involving uniqueness at various levels, as well as for anaphoric ones:

- (38) *Tè a ap tounen bò kote solèy la.*
 earth DEF IPFV turn next-to sun DEF
 ‘The earth revolves around **the sun.**’ (Wespel, 2008, p. 104; source: (E.F.62.))
- (39) *Yon fanm ak yon ti gason antre. Fanm la te pote yon kòbèy flè.*
 INDF woman and INDF DIM boy enter woman DEF PST carry INDF basket flower
 ‘A woman and a boy entered. **The woman** was holding a basket of flowers.’
 (Wespel (2008); source: (E.F.15.a.))

This lack of contrast extends to the bridging cases as well, i.e., both of the two types of examples of bridging where we have seen contrasts between articles before use (the relevant form of) *la*:

- (40) *Eli te renmen liv la, e kounye a li vle rankontre otè a.*
 Eli PST love book DEF and now DEF she want meet author DEF
 ‘Eli loved the book, and now she wants to meet **the author.**’
 (Wespel, 2008, p. 114; source: (E.F.32.))
- (41) *Yè, mwen viste yon vil provens. Meri a pi wo ke legliz la.*
 Yesterday I visit one town province town-hall DEF more high than church DEF
 ‘Yesterday I visited a town in the province. **The town hall** was higher than **the church.**’
 (Wespel, 2008, p. 114; source: (E.F.36.9.))

The only obvious case where HC diverges in its use of the definite determiner from English *the*, then, is with ‘complete functional descriptions’, i.e., descriptions whose head noun denotes a function and which involve an explicit argument for that function:

- (42) *papa Mari*
 ‘the father of Mary’

(Wespel, 2008)

Wespel shows that the HC form here cannot be analyzed as a possessive definite, and thus seems to be a definite without an overt article. Interestingly, relational descriptions seem to display some variability with respect to the presence of the article, although Wespel does not provide any comments on the contexts in which these might be used.

- (43) a. *frè Alsi a*
 brother alsì DEF (Wespel, 2008, p. 96)
- b. *Li fwape se Marie*
 he beat **sister Marie**
 ‘He beat **the sister of Mary.**’ (Wespel, 2008, p. 117)

Perhaps the most intriguing contrast reported by Wespel concerns definites with adjectival modifiers like *only* and *same*, as well as superlatives, as they suggest that the domain relative to which the definite is interpreted is of crucial importance in HC (interestingly, none of these contrasts are present in MC, which uses bare forms for these cases throughout).

- (44) *Pyé se sèl gason nan fanmi li.*
 P COP **only boy** in family his
 ‘Peter is **the only boy** in his family.’ (Wespel, 2008, p. 118; source: (E.F.76.20.a.))
- (45) *Fanmi sa a, se yon gwo fami, men Pyé se sèl gason an.*
 family DEM DEF COP INDF big family but P COP **only boy DEF**
 ‘This family is big, but Peter is **the only boy.**’ (Wespel, 2008, p. 119; source: (E.F.76.20.b.))

Somewhat similarly to the case of functional descriptions, the overt presence of a domain limiting phrase (here, *in his family*) inside of the definite description seems to make all the difference for the absence or presence of *la* (Wespel, 2008).

Superlatives exhibit a similar contrast, in that here, too, the location of the domain of comparison in the sentence governs the presence of *la*.

- (46) a. *Nan klas Mesye Dupont, pi bon elèv la pwal gen yon kado.*
 in class Mister Dupont **most good pupil** DEF PRSP have INDF reward
 ‘In Mister Dupont’s class, **the best pupil** will get a reward.’ (Wespel, 2008, p. 120; source: (E.F.69.a.))
- b. *Pi bon elèv nan klas Mesye Dupont pwal gen yon kado.*
most good pupil in class Mister Dupont PRSP have INDF reward
 ‘**The best student** in Mister Dupont’s class will get a reward.’ (Wespel, 2008, p. 120; source: (E.F.69.b.))
- (47) a. *Pòl monte sou montany ki pi wo an Afrik.*
 P climb on **mountain REL most high** in Africa
 ‘Paul climbed **the highest mountain** in Africa.’ (Wespel, 2008, p. 121; source: (E.F.68.24.))
- b. *Pemi Pyè, Pòl ak Mari, se Pòl ki monte sou montany ki pi wo a.*
 among P P and M COP P who climb on **mountain REL most high DEF**
 ‘Among Peter, Paul and Mary, Paul climbed **the highest mountain.**’ (Wespel, 2008, p. 121; source: (E.F.67.19.))

Based on these kinds of contrasts, Wespel (2008) indeed proposes that HC *la* indicates the choice of the domain of interpretation for the definite, in that it requires an interpretation relative to a resource situation that is independent of the situation relative to which the sentence as a whole is interpreted (the topic situation). The connection to situations and their role in the structures that are the basis of semantic computations is further corroborated by the fact that HC *la* (once again unlike MC *la*) has clausal uses as well, as in the following example:

- (48) *Mounn nan kraze manchinn nan an.*
 man DEF destroy car DEF DEF

‘The man has destroyed the car, as we knew he would.’

((1b) in (Lefebvre, 1998, p. 219), cited from Wespel (2008))

In a semantics along the lines of Percus (2000), where situations are represented in the syntactic structure, such cases then would seem to provide further evidence that (at least part of) the role of *la* relates to the identification of situations relative to which its sister node is interpreted. More work is needed, of course, to further elucidate this connection, and it will be of particular interest to relate this type of definite system to the definite systems discussed above.¹¹

5 Further Languages and Issues

5.1 Theoretical Implications

Our discussion has focused on a relatively narrow range of phenomena involving referential uses of (mostly singular) definites in languages that mark different types of definites in different ways, either by having two forms for the definite determiner or by contrasting an overt form with bare nominals. Quite strikingly, we found a general correspondence in the contrasts encoded by these two types of definites in most of the languages that we looked at (the main exception being HC). It thus seems like this contrast reveals something deeper about the options that natural language provides for organizing referential systems via definiteness, which comes with various theoretical implications.

Formal accounts of definite descriptions generally (though not without exception) aim to provide a unified semantic theory for them. From the perspective of English, this is a perfectly sensible approach striving for theoretical parsimony. At the same time, most advocates of either uniqueness or familiarity based accounts will likely admit that they face some challenges when it comes to some of the core cases that the respective other account takes as basic. In light of this, languages that have two forms expressing slightly different notions of definiteness provide a more comprehensive empirical perspective that has the potential to settle the theoretical debate in a compromising way. If languages can distinguish anaphoric uses of definites from situational uniqueness ones by employing different forms, this shows that natural language in principle has the resources to express both theoretical notions of definiteness. It is therefore at least possible to consider English *the* to be ambiguous between the strong and weak article (though, I hasten to say, we hardly have reached the grounds for concluding this with any certainty). And, moreover, to the extent that our study of natural language semantics and pragmatics strives for an understanding of human language in general, our view of the options that languages have in the domain of definite reference is enhanced substantially by considering such languages. Much remains to be said about a precise analysis of strong and weak articles, and in addition to analyzing them in terms of uniqueness and anaphoricity, other approaches to definites need to be related to the phenomena considered here as well. But at the end of the day, it seems certain that a broader, cross-linguistic perspective on definite descriptions contributes substantially to our theoretical understanding in this domain.

5.2 Further Uses of Definites

Future work in this area will need to take into consideration a variety of other uses of definites that have played a significant role in the theoretical literature. For example, most, if not all, of the strong articles allow for deictic uses (this seems to be the case at least in German, Fering, Akan, HC and MC, and Hausa, and might well be true in all languages with a specifically ‘anaphoric’ article). This raises the issue of the extent to which strong articles can be neatly distinguished from demonstratives (on which more below).

Another important topic in the interpretation of definites is that of covarying interpretations, that is, uses of definites under quantification, where there is no overall referent for the definite, as its interpretation varies with the quantifier. Such uses require us to see referential expressions in light of grammatical mechanisms that underly quantification and covariation. Both strong and weak articles in German and Fering allow for covarying uses,¹² which means that beyond just being a matter of the pragmatics of reference, the contrast is visible for the mechanisms of grammar that bring about covarying interpretations. It may also mean that

there are two types of grammatical mechanism that can bring about covarying interpretations (Schwarz, 2009).

Reference to kinds constitutes yet another important topic directly relating to definites, as many languages use definites to express kind reference (Krifka et al., 1995). To the extent that there is data available on these, all of the languages discussed here seem to use the weak article (or bare form) for kind reference.

A class of definites that has only recently been described in the literature is that of so-called ‘weak definites’ in the sense of Carlson et al. (2006), as in *go to the doctor/store/movies*, which do not seem to come with a uniqueness requirement. But all the languages with an article contrast where such data points have been discussed use the form corresponding to the weak article for weak definites. It is by no means clear at this point what the connection here will turn out to be at a more technical level, but languages with a contrast in definite forms might provide at least a partial insight into understanding weak definites of this sort.

5.3 Further Languages

Beyond the languages discussed here, several others have been noted to display similar phenomena. Hidatsa (Lyons, 1999; Matthews, 1965), Fungbe (Lefebvre and Brousseau, 2001), Mupun (Frajzyngier, 1993), and Mangarrayi (Dryer, 2011; Merlan, 1982) have been noted to have a dedicated anaphoric article, for example. American Sign Language could be yet another interesting case to look at, as it has a system of indexing discourse referents in the signing space that can, but do not have to be used with definites (Bernath, 2009).

While our focus here has been on languages that display some type of contrast between different forms expressing definite descriptions, we ultimately want a full comparison with languages that use one form for expressing definite descriptions throughout as well, of course. In particular, we may want to ask whether their articles are ambiguous, or whether they simply have a more general meaning. And there of course exists further variation between languages with only one definite article: French has an even broader use of definites than English (e.g. plural definites for kind reference), and Greek uses definite articles even with proper names (something that is possible in most, if not all, German dialects as well, though it seems to be optional throughout).

Last but not least, many languages (and possibly even the majority of the world’s languages) do not have anything corresponding to a definite determiner at all, such as Chinese and Russian, to name just two.¹³ It may well be that upon closer inspection, there is some variation in how (what semantically corresponds to) definite descriptions are expressed in these languages, e.g., with respect to using demonstrative forms to cover at least some of the ground that strong articles are used for.

5.4 The Syntax of Definites

Yet another dimension to be integrated into future research is that of the syntax of definites. Whenever bare nominals are one of the forms used to express definites, the question arises whether a phrasal projection corresponding to the determiner phrase (Abney, 1987) is present underlyingly or not (Longobardi, 1994, 2001; Bošković, 2005). Furthermore, Wiltschko (2011) argues for subtle distinctions on the level at which weak and strong definite articles appear in the structure in Austro-Bavarian to account for their distribution with respect to relative clauses.¹⁴ A further morpho-syntactic phenomenon of interest is present in Scandinavian languages such as Danish and Norwegian, where a definite marker either appears as a suffix on the noun or prenominally, depending on the presence or absence of adjectival modifiers (Hankamer and Mikkelsen, 2002; Lyons, 1999). For Norwegian, at least, it has been argued that there are semantic differences between the different forms of definites (Borthen, 1998), related to the referential vs. attributive distinction (Donellan, 1966).

5.5 Beyond Definite Descriptions: Pronouns and Demonstratives

Finally, the study of definite descriptions should be seen as part of a larger enterprise of investigating definite noun phrases in a more general sense. At the most immediate level, pronouns and demonstratives should be looked at in relation to definites cross-linguistically. At least since Postal (1969), the possibility that pronouns are definite articles without overt noun phrases has been entertained, a view that most recently

has been defended by Paul Elbourne (Elbourne, 2005, and following work).¹⁵ Various languages indeed have pronominal forms that are identical to definite articles, e.g., German (d-pronouns) and Loni (Dryer, 2011; Hamel, 1994). Demonstratives, which in the tradition of Kaplan (1989) had been seen as having a completely different nature from definites in that they involved rigid designation Kripke (1972), recently have been argued to be much more closely related to definites after all by a number of authors (King, 2001; Roberts, 2002; Wolter, 2006; Elbourne, 2008), and it seems like many languages use demonstratives at least in part as a correlate of anaphoric articles (e.g., Eastern Ojibwa; Dryer, 2011; Nichols, 1988), as well as for so-called recognitional uses (e.g., Nunggubuyu; Himmelmann, 1997). In addition, various languages seem to use the same form, but in different positions, to express demonstratives and definites (e.g., Swahili, Ute, Shambala, and Pa'a; Dryer, 2011).

Various languages also have contrasts in the pronominal domain that seem at least similar, if perhaps not completely identical, to that between weak and strong articles (see Bosch et al. (2003); Bosch and Umbach (2006); Bosch et al. (2007); Hinterwimmer (2009) on German, and Kaiser (2010b,a) on Finnish and Estonian, among others). American Sign Language, which we already noted has definite forms with and without an index, also uses pronominal forms that vary along these lines. Schlenker (2011) discusses the indexed versions at length in connection to important theoretical issues concerning so-called donkey sentences, and it will be interesting to see whether there are any contrasts in meaning or use between these different pronominal forms and how these relate to the contrasts in other languages.

5.6 Conclusion

The theoretical debate concerning the proper analysis of definites has been going strong for over a hundred years, and many important discussions are still to be had. I hope that by providing a survey of some of the cross-linguistic phenomena that are theoretically most interesting, which involve substantial variation but also striking parallels in completely unrelated languages, I have been able to make clear that intriguing new questions and new perspectives on old issues arise once we look beyond English *the*, and that further and deeper insights into definiteness in natural language can emerge as we broaden our empirical perspective. It would seem like there easily is another century of fascinating work to be done on the topic.

Notes

¹For a comprehensive overview of the ways in which definiteness can be realized in many different languages, see Lyons (1999).

²Here and below, when I say ‘two distinct definite articles’, this is to be understood as a claim about a semantic distinction. Many languages, of course, have surface variants of definite articles encoding gender, case, etc. Furthermore, the term ‘article’ should be understood broadly, since the morphological status of these forms varies across languages.

³For a variety of other general approaches, some of which may very well have the potential to differentiate between different types of definites, see Löbner (1985, 2011); Gundel et al. (1993); Grosz et al. (1995); Farkas (2002); Roberts (2003), among many others.

⁴Leu (2008) discusses an issue in Swiss German, though he focuses on syntactic issues.

⁵Unless otherwise noted, English translations from German publications are mine.

⁶But note that there are exceptions to this, i.e., cases where strong article definites are used without linguistic antecedents, so strong familiarity will have to be broadened to encompass such cases (See Arkoh and Matthewson, 2011, for some related discussion).

⁷Ebert does not discuss the contrast in standard German and therefore seems to assume that it is essentially on par with English in having only one form of a definite article.

⁸(Arkoh and Matthewson, 2011, provide an example with the epithet ‘idiot’, parallel to (11) above as well).

⁹The MC version arguably does not involve a possessive, but is instead parallel to ‘the head of Cassim’. Note also that many MC nouns ‘incorporate the remnant forms of the French definite articles’, without becoming definite themselves, as witnessed by their compatibility with any other determiner (Wespel, 2008, p. 141).

¹⁰Example numbers have been adjusted; ‘F’ preceding *dʒ-n* indicates falling tone

¹¹Wespel (2008) proposes a unified perspective on the phenomena found in MC and HC by specifying different restrictions on the resource situations for the two languages, but it remains to be seen whether such an analysis can be extended to all the cases discussed for the other languages above.

¹²In Haitian and Mauritian Creole, definites with *la* are shown to have covarying readings by Wespel (2008), but it remains to be seen whether there are any covarying readings for bare nominal definites in these languages, and other languages have to be investigated in this regard as well.

¹³See Partee (2005) on some discussion of possessives and demonstratives that relates to contrasts similar to the one we have been concerned with here.

¹⁴A peculiarity that has been discussed in quite some detail for most of the languages considered here is that restrictive relative clauses quite generally seem to require the strong article, though Wiltschko notes some exceptions to this.

¹⁵See Roberts (2004) for a slightly different but also unified perspective on pronouns and definites.

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