

DEFINITE AND INDEFINITE

Barbara Abbott
abbottb@msu.edu

Abstract

Noun phrases (NPs) beginning with *the* or *a/an* are prototypical definite and indefinite NPs in English. The two main theories about the meaning of definiteness are uniqueness and familiarity. Both properties characterize most occurrences of definite descriptions although there are examples which defy one or the other or both theories. Existential sentences have become criterial for distinguishing indefinites from definites, and have led to broadening of both categories to include a variety of other NP forms. Information status approaches propose a hierarchy of NP types, rather than a simple binary distinction. The expression of definiteness varies from language to language.

1. What does “definite” mean?

“Definite” and “indefinite” are terms which are usually applied to noun phrases (NPs). In English, *the* is referred to as “the definite article”, and *a/an* as “the indefinite article”. Noun phrases (NPs) which begin with *the* (e.g. *the Queen of England, the book*), which are also called (especially in the philosophical literature) “definite descriptions”, are generally taken to be prototypical examples of definite NPs in English. However it should be noted that not all of them show the same pieces of behavior that have come to be taken as criterial for definiteness. (See below, sections 2 and 3.) Similarly NPs which begin with *a/an* (*an elephant, a big lie*), “indefinite descriptions”, are prototypical examples of indefinite NPs. (Plural indefinite descriptions use the determiner *some*.)

1.1 Uniqueness?

Exactly what differentiates definite from indefinite NPs has been a matter of some dispute. One tradition comes from the philosophical literature, more specifically Bertrand Russell’s classic work on denoting phrases (Russell 1905). On this tradition what distinguishes *the* from *a/an* is uniqueness – more specifically the existence of one and only one entity meeting the descriptive content of the NP. So while use of an indefinite description in a simple, positive sentence merely asserts existence of an entity meeting the description, use of a definite description asserts in addition its uniqueness in that regard. While (1a), on this view, is paraphrasable as (1b), (2a) is equivalent to (2b).

- (1) a. I met an owner of El Azteco.
b. There is at least one owner of El Azteco whom I met.
- (2) a. I met the owner of El Azteco.
b. There is one and only one owner of El Azteco, and I met that individual.

It should be noted that Russell was concerned to capture the meaning of definite descriptions in a formal language of logic. Also, on his analysis both definite and indefinite descriptions are quantificational expressions (like explicitly quantified NPs such as *every apple, no unwanted*

visitors). As we will see below, the idea that definite descriptions are quantificational has been questioned by others, who view these NPs instead as referential. Fewer people question the idea that **indefinite** descriptions are quantificational, although some (primarily linguists rather than philosophers) assume that they too are referential.

The uniqueness theory seems to accord well with our intuitions. It also is supported by the fact that when we stress the definite article contrastively, it brings out the sense of uniqueness. Example (3)

(3) Did you meet **an** owner of *El Azteco* or **the** owner?

seems to be inquiring as to whether there is more than one owner, or only one.

It might seem that this approach would necessarily be confined to singular NPs. However, as argued by Hawkins (1978), the notion of uniqueness can be extended to plurals by employing the idea of exhaustiveness – the denotation of a definite consists of everything meeting the descriptive content of the NP. An NP like *the owners of El Azteco* would thus be held to be very similar to *all the owners of El Azteco*.

The first challenge to Russell’s analysis of definite descriptions was put forward by P.F. Strawson, who argued that sentences containing definite descriptions are not used to **assert** the existence and uniqueness of an entity meeting the descriptive content in question. Instead, Strawson argued that definite descriptions are referential NPs, and that the existence and uniqueness of a referent is **presupposed**. (Cf. Strawson 1950; in this seminal work Strawson did not use the term “presuppose”, although it appeared very quickly in reference to the phenomenon in question.) Strawson also argued that if the presupposition fails, the sentence as a whole is neither true nor false. Thus, in the case of (2a), should it turn out that no one owns *El Azteco* (perhaps it is a government installation), an addressee of (2a) would not respond “That’s false!”, but would rather correct the speaker’s mistaken presupposition.

Another, more serious, problem for Russell’s analysis has attracted a lot of attention more recently, and that is the fact that in a great number of cases, perhaps the vast majority, the descriptive content of a definite description is not sufficient to pick out a unique referent from the world at large. One example of such an “incomplete description” is in (4):

(4) Please put this on the table.

(4) is readily understandable despite the fact that the world contains millions of tables. There are two main kinds of approach to dealing with this problem. A syntactic solution would propose that there is sufficient additional descriptive material tacitly present in the NP – e.g. *the table next to the armchair in the living room of the house at 76 Maple Ave., Eastwood, Kansas, USA*. But it would be hard to explain how an addressee would guess which descriptive content had been left tacit. On a more plausible approach, the uniqueness encoded in definite descriptions should be understood relative to a context of utterance, which would only include those items in the surroundings of the discourse participants and those items mentioned in the course of the conversation or understood to be relevant to its topic. However this runs into a problem with examples like (5), first pointed out by James McCawley (McCawley 1979).

(5) The dog got into a fight with another dog.

David Lewis proposed instead that definite descriptions denote the most **salient** entity meeting the descriptive content (Lewis 1979).

1.2 Familiarity?

The other main tradition concerning the meaning of definiteness generally cites the Danish grammarian Paul Christophersen. In Christophersen’s view, what distinguishes definite from

indefinite descriptions is whether or not the addressee of the utterance is presumed to be acquainted with the referent of the NP. In an often cited passage, Christophersen remarks: “Now the speaker must always be supposed to know which individual he is thinking of; the interesting thing is that the *the*-form supposes that the hearer knows it too” (Christophersen 1939, 28). This approach appears to fare better with examples like (4) where, indeed, it seems that the speaker must be assuming that the addressee knows which table the speaker is referring to.

Within current linguistic theory, the familiarity approach was revived by the work of Irene Heim (1982, 1983). Like Strawson, Heim argued that definite descriptions are referential rather than quantificational; however she also argued indefinite descriptions are referential as well. Heim took the uses of definite and indefinite descriptions as they occur in (6) as typifying their semantics.

(6) Mary saw a movie last week. The movie was not very interesting.
In the mini discourse in (6), the indefinite NP *a movie* is used to introduce a new entity into the discourse context. Subsequently that entity is referred to with a definite (*the movie*). Notice that we might as easily have referred to the movie in the second sentence of (6) with a pronoun: ...*It was not very interesting*. Heim grouped pronouns and definite descriptions together as being governed by a “Familiarity” condition: use of a definite is only permitted when the existence of the referred to entity has been established in the particular discourse. Indefinite descriptions, on the other hand, are subject to a “Novelty” condition: they presuppose that their referent is being introduced into the discourse for the first time. It’s easy to see that this will solve the problem of incomplete descriptions. An example like (5) above would only be used when the first dog referred to was presumed to be known to the addressee.

Though the familiarity theory is very plausible for a number of uses of definite descriptions, there are some kinds of cases it does not appear to cover very well. One of these is definite descriptions where the descriptive content of the NP is sufficient to determine a unique referent, no matter what the context. Some examples are given in (7).

- (7) a. Mary asked the oldest student in the class to explain everything.
b. Philip rejected the idea that languages are strictly finite.

Here we need not assume that the addressee is familiar with the referents of the underlined NPs, or that these referents had been mentioned previously in the conversation. Note too that in this kind of case, the indefinite article is not allowed, as shown in (8). (The asterisk (*) in front of these examples indicates that they are not well formed.)

- (8) a. * Mary asked an oldest student in the class to explain everything.
b. * Philip rejected an idea that languages are strictly finite.

And even when the descriptive content is not sufficient to determine a unique referent relative to the whole world, there are examples where the content may determine a unique referent in context. In these cases too the definite article may be used, even if the addressee is not assumed to know who or what is being talked about. An example is given in (9).

(9) Sue is mad because the realtor who sold her house overcharged his fee.
Adherents to the familiarity theory often invoke the idea of **accommodation** (following Lewis 1979) to explain these uses. The idea is that addressees are willing to accept a definite description if they are able to figure out the intended referent

1.3 Some puzzling cases

While most occurrences of definite descriptions are consistent with both the uniqueness theory and the familiarity theory, there are several kinds which don't match either theory. One group of examples is given in (10):

- (10) a. Horace took the bus to Phoenix.
b. The elevator will take you to the top floor.

It seems that with modes of transportation a singular definite description can be used despite the fact that there are, e.g., many buses to Phoenix, and the building in (10b) may have many elevators. We also don't suppose that the addressee will be familiar with the particular bus or elevator in question. A different kind of case is illustrated in (11).

- (11) a. My uncle wrote something on the wall.
b. We camped by the side of a river.
c. She shot herself in the foot.

These sentences are well formed even though rooms typically have more than one wall, rivers more than one side, and people more than one foot. It may be relevant that these are locations. In all of these cases, as pointed out by Du Bois (1980), to use an indefinite article puts too much emphasis on the location, as though it were inappropriately being brought into focus.

A third kind of example shows some dialectal variation. The example in (12):

- (12) My mother is in the hospital.

is well formed in American English, although in British English the article would be missing from the underlined NP. Compare the examples in (13), which are good in both dialects.

- (13) a. Bill went to school this morning.
b. If you're very good, you'll get to heaven some day.

The examples below, also good for English in general, indicate a certain amount of idiomaticity.

- (14) a. I heard it on the radio.
b. I saw it on TV.

It seems that some nouns simply require the definite article while others are fine without it.

Finally, some adjectives call for the definite article in English, despite not restricting the reference of NPs they occur in to either a unique or a familiar referent.

- (15) She gave the wrong answer and had to be disqualified.

It is not clear whether these examples indicate the need for a brand new theory of the definite article in English, or are just idiomatic exceptions to the rule.

2. Grammatical phenomena

Sensitivity to definiteness of NP is called a **definiteness effect**, and a number of constructions are believed to have such an effect.

2.1 Existential sentences

One of the earliest constructions showing a definiteness effect to be noticed was existential or *there be* sentences. Examples like those in (16) are quite natural, but the corresponding sentences in (17) sound peculiar, if not downright ungrammatical.

- (16) a. There is a book in the shop window.
b. There were some bachelors on board the ship.
(17) a. * There is the book in the shop window.
b. * There were the bachelors on board the ship.

One complicating factor is the existence of a construction which is similar to the existential construction but which is used in a restricted set of circumstances. This latter kind of sentence, often called a **list existential**, typically seems to be used to offer entities to fulfill some role or purpose. However, this kind of existential does not allow a locative prepositional phrase to follow the focus NP. Examples just like those in (17), but where the prepositional phrase is an NP modifier, as in (17')

- (17') a. There is the book in the shop window.
b. There were the bachelors on board the ship.

could be used in reply to the questions in (18):

- (18) a. What can we get for Bill for his birthday?
b. Weren't there any people around to help?

The more common type of existential, like those in (16), can be called **locative** existentials. In this case the prepositional phrase following the focus NP is a separate constituent locating the item in question. It is only locative conditionals which show a definiteness effect, and these have been used as a test for definiteness, as we will see below in section 3.

2.2 The *have* construction

Another construction, similar to existential sentences, is one involving the verb *have* when it is used to indicate inalienable possession. Here too we see a definiteness effect, in that the examples in (19) are natural, while those in (20) are not.

- (19) a. She had a full head of hair.
b. He had a sister and two brothers.
(20) a. * She had the full head of hair.
b. * He had the sister and the two brothers.

It is perhaps not too surprising that these two constructions should show a similar definiteness effect, since *have* and *be* verbs are often used for similar kinds of propositions in the world's languages.

3. Other kinds of definite and indefinite NPs

As we saw in section 1, there is no commonly agreed on essence of definiteness or indefiniteness. Hence the need for some kind of diagnostic for these properties. Ability to occur naturally in a locative existential has become the main diagnostic used.

3.1 Other kinds of definite NPs

As noted above, Heim assumed that pronouns are definite, like definite descriptions. Others agree with this categorization. And as we might expect, pronouns do not go naturally in locative existentials. The sentences in (21) are not natural.

- (21) a. * There was it in the fireplace.
b. * There were them all over the floor.

Pronouns seem to fit both the uniqueness and the familiarity conceptions of definiteness. When they are used it is assumed that there is a unique intended referent within the discourse context, and it is also assumed that the addressee will know who or what the speaker was intending to refer to.

Another subcategory of NP which is typically assumed to be definite consists of proper names. Like pronouns and definite descriptions, these do not occur naturally in locative existentials.

- (22) a. * There was Joan in the library.
 b. * There is France in the United Nations.

Although it might not be so obvious as it is with pronouns, proper names also seem definite by both theories of definiteness. Proper names behave as though they have a unique referent; they cannot accept restrictive adjectives or other restrictive modifiers. And in fact in most contexts each proper name does have a unique referent. On the other hand we do not usually use a proper name unless we assume that our addressee has already been introduced to the referent.

A third kind of NP which is generally agreed to be definite would be those that have a demonstrative determiner: *this, that, these, or those*. These cannot occur naturally in a locative existential as shown below.

- (23) a. * There was that book over there in Mary's bag last Tuesday.
 b. * There are these applicants waiting to see the dean.

In addition, NPs with a possessive determiner are usually classed as definite.

- (24) * There was Mary's car in the driveway.

Indeed, NPs with possessive determiners are typically regarded as belonging to the category of definite descriptions.

Some kinds of quantified NPs cannot occur naturally in existential sentences, and this has led some people to consider them to be definite NPs. Some examples are given in (25).

- (25) a. * There were all the students at the party.
 b. * There were most red buttons on the dress.

However it is possible that these NPs should not be classified as definite, and that there is some other reason why they cannot occur in locative existential sentences.

3.2 Bare NPs

One interesting kind of NP in English has received a significant amount of attention. So called **bare NPs** do not have any determiner, and the head noun must be either plural or a mass noun. These NPs have (at least) two distinct uses. Sometimes they are interpreted generically, as in the examples below.

- (26) a. Mary likes sharpened pencils.
 b. Water with fluoride in it is good for the teeth.

The sentences in (26) concern the whole category referred to by the underlined NP. On the other hand sometimes these bare NPs have an existential interpretation, where they are just referring to some members or a subpart of the category.

- (27) a. Mary bought sharpened pencils.
 b. There was water with fluoride in it in the test tube.

As can be seen in example (27b), when bare NPs occur in a locative existential sentence, they can only have the existential interpretation, and not the generic one.

3.3 Other types of indefinite NPs

In addition to indefinite descriptions, and bare NPs with the existential interpretation, there are other types of NPs that go naturally in locative existentials. Some examples of quantified NPs are shown in (28).

- (28) a. There are a few pieces of cake left.
 b. There were few, if any, fresh persons at the school fair.
 c. There are many problems for that course of action.
 d. There are some big flecks of paint on the back of your coat.

If we use natural occurrence in a locative existential as a diagnostic, then these other types would also be classified as indefinite NPs.

In addition to these, there are some other unexpected cases of NPs which look as though they should be definite, because they have definite determiners, but which can appear naturally in a locative existential. One kind, noticed first by Prince (1981), uses the proximal demonstrative determiner (*this, these*), but with an indefinite reference.

- (29) a. There was this strange note on the blackboard.
b. There are these disgusting globs of stuff in the bowl.

Note that this is definitely a different use of these determiners. The examples in (29) would not be used with any kind of pointing gesture, and indeed, they could be used in a phone conversation, where the addressee is not in the same perceptual situation as the speaker. Also, it is worth noting that this indefinite use of *this* and *these* is somewhat marked stylistically.

Examples like those in (29) would not appear in a formal context.

Finally, there are some kinds of NPs that look like definite descriptions but whose sense is indefinite, and which can appear naturally in existentials.

- (30) a. There was the nicest young man at the picnic!
b. There were the same nominees on both ballots.

As Prince (1992) points out, an NP like *the same nominees* can have two interpretations. One is anaphoric, as in (31)

- (31) The Executive Committee came up with a list of nominees, and it happened that the Nominating Committee chose the same nominees.

Here *the same nominees* refers back to the Executive Committee's list, and means that the Nominating Committee's choices were the same as the Executive Committee's. On this interpretation *the same nominees* would be definite. However the interpretation in (30b) is different: it means that the two ballots had the same choices. This interpretation is apparently indefinite, given the ability of this NP to occur naturally in the existential sentence in (30b).

4 Other kinds of categorizations

A simple binary distinction like definite vs. indefinite may be too crude, especially if we are trying to classify NPs in general. Furthermore it may be more useful to look at the role of NP form with respect to discourse function. A number of researchers have turned to the idea of **information status** – an extension of the familiarity idea but with greater articulation.

4.1 Old and new

Prince (1992) argued that we need to distinguish two ways in which information can be novel or familiar, new or old. One is with respect to (the speaker's assumption about) the addressee, which Prince called **Hearer-old** and **Hearer-new**. The speaker assumes that the addressee is already acquainted with the referent of a Hearer-old NP, whereas Hearer-new NPs are assumed to introduce new entities to the addressee. On the other hand entities can be new or old with respect to a discourse: **Discourse-old** or **Discourse-new**. Discourse-old NPs refer to entities which have already been mentioned in the current discourse, in contrast to Discourse-new NPs. Prince found that it was the category of Hearer-old/Hearer-new which correlated roughly with the definite/indefinite distinction, rather than Discourse-old/Discourse-new. This seems to agree more with Christophersen's than with Heim's conception of definiteness and indefiniteness.

4.2 *The givenness hierarchy*

Gundel, Hedberg and Zacharski (1993) proposed a hierarchy of givenness corresponding to the degree to which the referent of an NP is assumed to be cognitively salient to the addressee. Each point in the hierarchy corresponds to one or more NP forms. At one end of the hierarchy is the weakest degree of knownness, which Gundel et al. label “type identifiable”. This end corresponds to indefinite descriptions, and the criterion for their use is just that the addressee is familiar with the kind of thing denoted. At the other extreme we find NPs denoting entities which are currently “in focus”, and pronouns require this extreme of cognitive salience.

Definite descriptions are about midway in the hierarchy, requiring unique identifiability for their referents. Just to the weaker side are the indefinite *this/these* NPs mentioned above in section 3.3. On the more salient side of definite descriptions are NPs with demonstratives (*this, that, these, those*) as determiners.

One special aspect of this treatment is that the criteria for each place on the hierarchy are increasingly stringent and subsume the criteria for all less stringent points; that is, the hierarchy is an implicational one. Hence indefinite descriptions, which have the weakest requirement, can appear anywhere in principle – even when their referents are in focus. However general conversational principles militate against using an indefinite description in such a situation as it would be misleading in suggesting that only the weakest criterion had been satisfied.

4.3 *The accessibility hierarchy*

A third approach, similar to the one just mentioned but with its own distinct characteristics, has been developed by Mira Ariel (1990, 2001). Ariel proposes an even more articulated accessibility hierarchy, reflecting the marking of NPs according to how accessible in human memory their referents should be. Upwards of 15 distinct categories are represented, ranging from full name plus modifier (at the least accessible end) to zero pronouns (represented with \emptyset), which are found in constructions like those in (32).

- (32) a. Mary wanted \emptyset to build a cabin.
b. Open \emptyset in case of fire.

Full name plus modifier (e.g. *Senator Hillary Clinton*) is distinguished from full name, last name alone, or first name alone, each of which receives a separate spot on the hierarchy. Similarly long definite descriptions, with a lot of descriptive content, are distinguished from short ones, and stressed pronouns from unstressed pronouns. (The list does not contain quantified and (other) indefinite NPs, which, as noted above, are often considered not to be referential expressions.)

Ariel’s claim is that the hierarchy of NP forms corresponds to accessibility, where the latter is determined by a number of factors including topichood, recency and number of previous mentions, and how stereotypic the referent is for the context. The NP forms go generally from fullest and most informative to briefest and least informative, \emptyset being the limiting case. The idea is that an NP form typically encodes an appropriate amount of information for the addressee to achieve easy identification of the referent.

5 **Definite and indefinite in other languages**

The examples above have all been taken from English. However many other languages have definite and/or indefinite articles, though by no means all of them. Lyons (1999) describes the explicit marking of definiteness – whether with an article or a nominal inflection – as an areal feature which characterizes the languages of Europe and the Middle East in particular, although

it can be found elsewhere in the world as well (Lyons 1999, 48). Definite articles often seem to develop out of demonstrative determiners, as was the case in English. Indefinite articles, on the other hand, often come from the word for ‘one’.

Some languages, e.g. Irish, have only a definite article, whereas others, e.g. Turkish, mark only indefinites explicitly. The examples below are taken from Lyons (1999, 52):

- (33) *Irish*
 a. an bord ‘the table’
 b. bord ‘a table’
- (34) *Turkish*
 a. ev ‘house’, ‘the house’
 b. bir ev ‘a house’

Even among languages which have both definite and indefinite marking, the usages typically do not match exactly across languages. Thus, as noted above, bare NPs in English have a generic use (as in the examples in (26)). French also has both definite and indefinite determiners, but, unlike English, would use the definite determiner in examples like those in (26):

- (35) a. Marie aime les crayons bien taillés
 b. L'eau au fluor est bonne pour les dents.

In languages which do not use articles or some other explicit marking for definiteness or indefiniteness, word order may affect interpretation in that way, as in the following examples from Chinese and Russian.

- (36) *Mandarin Chinese*
 a. Zhuo-zi shang you shu.
 table on have book
 ‘There is a book (or books) on the table.’
 b. Shu zai zhuo-zi shang.
 book is located table on
 ‘The book is on the table.’
- (37) *Russian*
 a. Na stolé lezhít karta.
 on table lies map
 ‘There is a map lying on the table.’
 b. Karta lezhít na stolé.
 map lies on table
 ‘The map is lying on the table.’

However it should be noted that word order variation also interacts with topicality and the distribution of new and old information in a sentence, and that this affects the definiteness or indefiniteness of an NP’s interpretation.

For a full discussion of the expression of definiteness and indefiniteness in a variety of the world’s languages, see Lyons (1999).

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