



# Definiteness

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# Definiteness

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Primarily a pragmatic, essentially deictic ('pointing at') function, definiteness is expressed cross-linguistically by different devices: phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical. The most characteristic such device is the definite article (*the*), i.e. a bound morpheme operating on a noun or noun phrase. When it operates on a nonnominal element, the latter is nominalized—it is turned into a noun. Conversely, all deictics and nominals that function deictically (i.e. all linguistic elements that 'point out' a referent), including proper nouns, are definite intrinsically.

Definiteness is a scalar opposition, i.e. definiteness/indefiniteness are two poles between which there are multiple intermediate points. Nonreferential indefiniteness and denominalization are iconically bound to be marked by zero (indicated below by  $\emptyset$ ), intermediate degrees are cross-linguistically marked by several devices, e.g. indefinite articles (*a*), a clitic deictic demonstrative (*this-*), etc.

Definiteness is a multidimensional notion that can combine referentiality, specificity, identification, actualization, genericity, individuation, familiarity, and shared knowledge. Some combinations are:

- definite referential, specific, identifying, cf. *The book I am reading is Tom Sawyer*;
- indefinite referential, specific, nonidentifying, cf. *Tom Sawyer is a book I am reading*;
- definite referential, specific, shared knowledge, cf. *I'm looking for the book [I was reading] #*
- indefinite referential, specific, nonshared knowledge cf. *I'm looking for a book [bu:k]... (≈ that was here a minute ago) #*

—indefinite nonreferential, nonspecific, nonshared knowledge cf. *I'm looking for a book [buk] # (≈ any book).*

The last two utterances clearly differ by content and context. The first of the two may answer a question of the type *What are you looking for [on the table/in the room/...]?*, or: *Have you lost anything?*, etc. The person answering has a specific book in mind. The second utterance, on the other hand, may represent the first sentence of a client entering a store, who does not necessarily have a specific book in mind. As far as form is concerned, both utterances are likely to differ as well, by means of vowel length, intonation and prosody. In the first one, the accentuated vowel of the indefinite noun is likely to be slightly longer than in the second utterance, where it is non-marked for length. The intonation contour of the first is less clear-cut and the utterance does not end as abruptly as the second, whose intonation contour is the one characteristic of the affirmative sentence, with a clear descent of tone and ending in a clear-cut pause.

In English, if an abstract noun is definite, it is actualized, cf.  $\emptyset$  *Truth is what we should stand for, but the truth is that we don't*. Other nouns whose referents too are seen as nonindividuated, i.e. mass nouns, are incompatible with the indefinite article, cf. *The / \*a sand*. Compatibility is obtained through individuation by numeral classifiers, cf. *a grain of sand*. When a member of a set is definite but nonreferential, nonspecific, nonindividuated, it is generic, i.e. stands for the whole set and is equivalent to the indefinite nonreferential, nonspecific, nonindividuated plural, cf. *The bear*

*hibernates* ≈  $\emptyset$  **Bears** *hibernate*. A **bear** *hibernates*, in contrast, would be indefinite nonreferential, nonspecific, individuated. Unique elements are definite, e.g. **the sun**, although they may not be, if they are seen as part of a set, cf. *love under another sun*. There are languages that devote a special form or syntactic structure to mark the indefinite partially referential, cf. French *Je cherche du pain* 'I'm looking for **some bread**'.

Negative constructions are hardly compatible with definiteness since most of its dimensions are absent, cf. Fr. *Je veux de la soupe* 'I want **some soup**' vs. *Je ne veux pas de  $\emptyset$  soupe* 'I do not want  $\emptyset$  soup', Russian *Ivan kupil komputer* 'Ivan bought **a computer**' (accusative) vs. *Ivan ne kupil komputera* 'Ivan did not buy **a(ny) computer**' (genitive). This is valid for ergative languages too, cf. Basque *Nik dut baratze bat* 'I have a garden' (absolutive) vs. *nik ez dut baratzerik* 'I do not have a garden' (partitive). If negation is identified contrastively, definiteness is possible, cf. *Je ne veux pas la soupe, je veux la salade* 'I do not want **the soup**, I want **the salad**'.

Nouns that are incorporated into a verb are incompatible with definiteness, cf. *to go hunt a bear* vs. *to go  $\emptyset$  bearhunting*, and so are other denominalized nouns, e.g. adverbialized ones, cf. *take  $\emptyset$  fire*.

A particular effect is obtained when definiteness operates on nouns definite by nature, e.g. proper names (of which the definite article is not a permanent constituent)

- referential, specific, cf. *I'm looking for  $\emptyset$  (Mr.) Jones*
- referential, specific, identifying, cf. *I'm looking for **the Mr. Jones** who was here yesterday*
- referential, specific, nonidentifying, cf. *I'm looking for **a Mr. Jones** who is supposed to live here* (when an explicit article is present, prefixed civility classifiers (*Mr...*) or suffixed human classifiers (*...boy/girl*), cf. *a/the Mr. Jones/Jones boy/guy/Beth girl*, etc. block the reifying effect of the article).

In English, the definite article allows also to pluralize and actualize proper nouns, e.g. last names: **The Smiths**. In Córdoba (Argentina) Spanish, in rural French, etc., it is first names that are actualized by the definite article in all functions to convey familiarity. There are languages in which the article operates on proper nouns that are the topic of the utterance. Topicality (old information) and definiteness are narrowly correlated, as are focality (new information) and indefiniteness. In Nêlêmwâ (Melanesian), *l-xe/* functions both as a definite article and a topicalizer. Topics tend to be subjectal, agentive, human, deictic, and first actants of transitive verbs; topical nouns with

any or some of these properties tend to be definite. Focal (new information) ones tend to be predicative, objectal, patientive, nonhuman, nondeictic, second actants of transitive verbs and indefinite. If definite and/or human, they are discursively marked, and often formally as well, cf. Sp. *Vi la casa* 'I saw **the house**' vs. *Vi a la mujer* 'I saw **the woman**' Contemporary Hebrew (CH) [*ra?iti  $\emptyset$  dira*] vs. [*ra?iti ?et ha-?ifa*], Guaraní [*aheja oga- $\emptyset$* ] vs. [*aheja kuña-me*]. Hence, existential constructions (*There is...*) in which the noun is the focus are cross-linguistically incompatible with definiteness, cf. Spanish \**Hay el libro#* \* 'There is **the book#**' (the asterisk marks ungrammaticality), CH \**[ye/ha-sefer#]*, Fr. \**Il y a le livre#* 'id.' One way to override this constraint, viz. to actualize or topicalize an indefinite noun, is to use a deictic demonstrative, cf. *There was a guy#* vs. *There was this guy, who...* or to focalize the existential, cf. CH *[ye/ $\emptyset$ -sefer#]* vs. *[ye/no ha-sefer#]*. Conversely, a means to focalize a definite noun is the presentative construction, cf. *Here is the book*, Fr. *Voilà le livre*, CH *[hine ha-sefer]*, Sp. *He aquí el libro*. Accordingly, the definiteness gradient correlates with (1) aspect: bounded action ~ definite agent vs. unbounded action ~ indefinite agent; note that genericity blocks the actualizing aspect, cf.  $\emptyset$  **The bear** *hibernates* /\* *is hibernating*; (2) dynamicity: active verb ~ definite agent vs. stative verb/adjective/nominal predicate ~ indefinite actant; (3) inherency: operating on a nominal predicate, the indefinite article assigns the subject to a set established by that predicate, cf. German *Die Kirsche ist  $\emptyset$  sauer* 'The cherry is sour' vs. *Die Kirsche ist eine saure* 'The cherry is of the sour type', Fr. *Il est  $\emptyset$  psychologue* 'He understands people' vs. *C'est un psychologue* 'He is a psychologist'. The link between (1), (2), and (3) is apparent in Spanish, where *estar* ('be', punctual-dynamic-accidental) is incompatible with the indefinite article, while *ser* ('be', durative-stative-inherent) is compatible with it, cf. respectively \**Está / Es una cereza amarga/(un) sicólogo*; (4) noun class, including sex gender. In languages displaying this category, its marks coalesce with those of deixis and often definiteness so that the class prefixes in Bantu; Guaykuru (Amerind); etc., function as definite articles.

Diachronically, a definite article is descended from a deictic demonstrative. Discursively, the definite article is an anaphoric i.e. an intradiscursive deictic device *par excellence*, i.e. it always points to something mentioned, either previously or afterwards, or given/inferable from context (including general truths). This is accomplished either explicitly, cf. *We reached a river nearby. The river was majestic*, or implicitly, cf. *We reached a river nearby. The other bank was too distant to be seen*. Deixis is also the first function cast upon the

definite article by the child acquiring language. These facts illustrate that definiteness is essentially deictic, and hence of a communicative-pragmatic nature, which is why it is conveyed in all tongues, albeit not necessarily by a specific morpheme. Quintilian's (born AD 35) words: *Noster sermo articulos non desiderat, ideo in alias partes orationis sparguntur* 'Our language does not want articles; hence, thei(r functions) are cast upon other parts of the sentence' apply cross-linguistically; languages not having developed a specific form of a deictic demonstrative to work as a definite article apply to other mechanisms to perform this task. Classical Latin is an example, cross-linguistically current, of definiteness marking in a tongue with no articles: a definite noun is placed in sentence initial position (which often coincides with subject position). There are languages that developed a definite article, then lost it as such either by phonological or by semantic attrition, and then developed a new one. This includes, among others, African languages of various stocks. In Nahuatl, the deictic-nominalizer /in/ functions as definite article when prefixed to the noun; this is corroborated by the fact that when a noun does not bear such a prefix, it is predicative. The suffix /-tl/ marks a vast majority of nouns (except in incorporation, in the plural, when the noun is possessed and in quantifiers, indefinites, and interrogatives); Neo-Aramaic /-a/ behaves similarly. Those are erstwhile deictics that cliticized into definite articles, and then spread to all nouns in all positions and became mere nominalizers.

The numeral 'one' often develops a clitic form to mark an indefinite noun as referential, and the process starts by marking it as specific: CH [ʔexad/ʔaxat] 'one', respectively, m. and f., evolved a clitic form [-ʔe)xad/-(ʔa)xat], cf. [*cipor(ʔa)xat ʔamr-a li*] '*a (certain) bird told me*' vs. [*ha-xasida hi cipor-nod ø*] '*the stork is a migrating bird*'. At present, an anteposed, concordant and often stressed form of /ʔejze/ 'which', followed by the relative particle /je/ and a third person deictic is spreading to focalize not the noun itself but its being indefinite referential, specific-, cf. [*je ʔejzofehi hitkadmud*] 'there is some [undoubted] progress'. Both recent marks are incompatible with each other as well as with the definite article /ha-/ and with a free deictic, which confirms that (in)definiteness is a scalar opposition.

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See also **Deixis; Determiner; Reference**