

Uniqueness, Familiarity, and the Definite Article in English*

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1 Introduction

Research into the meaning of the English definite article has generally been approached from one of two perspectives, characterizable as ‘familiarity’ and ‘uniqueness’. That is, felicitous use of the definite article has been argued to require that the referent of the NP be either familiar within the discourse (e.g., Christopherson 1939; Heim 1982, 1983; Green 1989; *inter alia*) or uniquely identifiable to the hearer (e.g., Russell 1905, Hawkins 1978, Lewis 1979, Kadmon 1990, Roberts 1993, Gundel et al. 1993, *inter alia*). The vast majority of uses can be accounted for under either view, since an entity typically must be familiar in a given discourse in order to be identifiable to the hearer. However, neither approach alone can account for all felicitous uses of the definite article. For example, a unique but unfamiliar entity may be felicitously referred to with *the*, as in (1), while in other instances, a familiar but non-unique referent may be felicitously referred to with *the*, as in (2):

- (1) a. In her talk, Baldwin introduced *the notion that syntactic structure is derivable from pragmatic principles*.
- b. If you’re going into the bedroom, would you mind bringing back *the big bag of potato chips that I left on the bed*?
- (2) a. [To spouse, in a room with three equally salient windows] It’s hot in here. Could you please open *the window*?
- b. [Hotel concierge to guest, in a lobby with four elevators] You’re in Room 611. Take *the elevator* to the sixth floor and turn left.

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In this paper we argue that unique identifiability within the discourse context is a sufficient but not necessary condition for felicitous use of the definite article; however, we claim, whenever the referent is not uniquely identifiable on the basis of the definite NP it must be both undifferentiated and not relevantly differentiable in context (cf. Kadmon 1990). It should be noted that we are dealing here only with the definite article, and will not be considering other definite determiners, such as possessives, deictics and quantifiers, whose usage appears to be governed by distinct pragmatic principles. We begin with a brief survey of previous approaches to the meaning of the definite article.

2 Previous approaches

A Heim-style approach to definiteness, where use of a definite NP is felicitous just in case its referent has been previously evoked (and thus is associated with an existing filecard in the model) provides neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for the felicitous use of the definite article.

For instance, in the example given above in (1a), *the notion that syntactic structure is derivable from pragmatic principles* is felicitous even when the claim in question represents brand-new information (in the sense of Prince 1981). Crucially, however, it also represents information that is uniquely identifiable, in that there is exactly one notion that is denoted by the NP (cf. Hawkins 1978, 1991). Thus, the NP itself uniquely specifies the claim in question.

Similarly, in (1b) the bag of potato chips is likewise unfamiliar information. Moreover, in this case the entity isn't NECESSARILY uniquely identified by the NP, as it was in (1a); there could in principle be any number of such bags in the bedroom. Nonetheless, as long as it is in fact (believed to be) the only big bag of potato chips left on the bed by the speaker, it is uniquely identifiable and the use of the definite is felicitous.

Note that unfamiliar entities such as those in (1a) and (1b) must be distinguished from what has been called 'accommodation', 'inferrability', or 'bridging' (Lewis 1979, Prince 1981, Clark and Marshall 1981, Heim 1982, inter alia), illustrated in (3):

- (3) a. I had dinner at that new Italian restaurant last night. It was a nice place, but *the appetizer* was far too spicy for my tastes.
b. I hated that book. *The author* is an idiot.

In these examples, the italicized NP represents an entity that is strictly speaking new to the discourse, yet its existence is easily accommodated on the basis of the evoked triggers *dinner* and *book*, respectively. That is, given a dinner we can infer the likely existence of an appetizer, and given a book we can infer

the likely existence of its author. Note that in both cases, however, we infer uniqueness: in (3a) we infer a UNIQUE appetizer (i.e., an appetizer which is salient or prominent), and in (3b) we infer a unique author.

The felicity of (1a), however, requires no such trigger on the basis of which the hearer can infer the likely existence of the notion in question, nor in (1b) need there be a trigger on the basis of which the hearer can plausibly infer the existence of the bag of potato chips in question. Since the definite article may be felicitously used to refer to entities that have not been previously evoked in the discourse and which are not assumed to be otherwise familiar to the hearer or inferable from the context, such as in (1a) and (1b), we can conclude that familiarity (either within the discourse or within the hearer's knowledge store) is not a necessary condition for felicitous use of the definite article.

On the other hand, it is easy to show that familiarity is also not a sufficient condition for the felicitous use of the definite article. Consider (4):

- (4) Professors Smith and Jones are rivals in the English Department, and each of them has received a major research grant for next year. #The other members of the department are very excited about *the grant*.

Here, although the grant in question has been evoked in the prior utterance and can therefore be considered familiar to the hearer, the use of the definite article is nonetheless infelicitous. The problem, of course, is that the hearer has no way of knowing which of the two grants previously evoked is the one being referred to. In this example we see that familiarity alone does not license the use of the definite article. Thus, familiarity is neither necessary nor sufficient for the felicitous use of the definite article in English.

Similarly, it can be shown that uniqueness is not a necessary condition for the felicitous use of the definite, as illustrated in examples such as those in (2a) and (2b) above. These examples illustrate the use of the definite article for referents that are familiar but non-unique, and in each case the utterance is fully felicitous. Again, note that these cases do not involve accommodation, as there is no trigger on the basis of which the hearer is expected to infer a unique relevant window or elevator, respectively. Moreover, in the felicitous cases of accommodation given in (3) above, the hearer is expected to infer a particular uniquely identifiable appetizer and author. Without this uniqueness, the accommodated definite NP is infelicitous, as illustrated in (5):

- (5) a. I went skiing yesterday and did pretty well, even though the ski poles were bent.
b. I went skiing yesterday and did pretty well, even though #the ski pole was bent.

In this case, the hearer can accommodate a unique set of ski poles, rendering (5a) felicitous; but because the individual poles are non-unique, neither

can be referred to individually with a definite NP, and (5b) is infelicitous. In (2a) and (2b), on the other hand, no unique window or elevator need be intended or inferred, yet the utterances are nonetheless felicitous; these examples therefore differ from cases of accommodation. Since, as in (2a) and (2b), the definite article may felicitously be used for referents that are familiar but non-unique, we see that uniqueness is not necessary for the use of the definite article.

It does appear to be the case, however, that uniqueness is sufficient for the felicitous use of the definite. Here, ‘uniqueness’ is crucially defined as the property of being (believed by the speaker to be) uniquely identifiable to the hearer – where by ‘identifiable’ we mean distinguishable from all other discourse entities, whether or not it can be identified on the basis of other attributes. (For example, *the tallest boy in my class* refers to a uniquely identifiable entity whether or not the hearer is able to attach a name or other attributes to the referent.) Lewis (1979) observes that uniqueness cannot be determined independently of speaker and hearer beliefs. Consider (6), where world knowledge rules out a coreferential reading for the two kings mentioned:

(6) *The king* is dead. Long live *the king*!

Here, the infelicity of wishing a long life for a king just proclaimed to be dead renders the referent of the second utterance of *the king* unambiguously and uniquely identifiable. Thus, in all cases where the speaker believes that the hearer would identify a single unique referent for the relevant NP, the speaker may felicitously use the definite article. This uniqueness is frequently but not always established on the basis of prior knowledge of the referent – i.e., on the basis of familiarity. The definite article, then, may be used to refer to an unfamiliar entity just so long as that entity is nonetheless uniquely identifiable. We will discuss below a range of cases in which familiarity and uniqueness diverge in this respect.

Finally, proponents of Relevance Theory, while acknowledging that most uses of the definite article involve unique identification of the intended referent, note that in some cases uniqueness needn’t hold. Wilson (1990), for example, claims that no sense of uniqueness obtains in contexts where ‘optimal relevance’ will be achieved no matter which referent is selected, as in (2) above. However, consider the examples in (7):

- (7) a. [a pile of books lies on the floor in front of A and B, closer to B]
A: I need a hard surface to write on. #Would you please hand me *the book*?
- b. I went to class today but I forgot my backpack and had nothing to write with. Fortunately, the guy sitting next to me had three identical pens on his desk. Before I could say anything, #he gave me *the pen*.

These utterances would presumably be optimally relevant no matter which book or pen is selected as the referent, yet the definite is infelicitous in each case. However, that is not to say that the Relevance approach is without merit: as we will see, relevance plays a crucial role in the use of definite NPs to refer to entities that are not uniquely identifiable.

3 The mismatch between familiarity and definiteness

As noted above, there is a great deal of overlap between the set of entities that are (presumed to be) familiar to a hearer and the set of entities that are (presumed to be) uniquely identifiable to the hearer, since an entity typically must be familiar in a given discourse in order to be identifiable. However, there are a number of exceptions to this correlation. We will now show that just as a familiar entity needn't be uniquely identifiable, likewise a uniquely identifiable entity needn't be familiar.

In earlier work (Birner & Ward 1993, Ward & Birner 1994), we identified a number of classes of definite NPs that represent information which is simultaneously new to the hearer and uniquely identifiable. One such class, exemplified in (1) above, are those NPs that are sufficiently rich in description to fully and uniquely identify a relevant discourse entity which nonetheless constitutes new information for the hearer. Such NPs are felicitous in first-mention contexts, as illustrated in (8):

- (8) Repeated school cancellations due to the recent snowstorms have given rise to *the possibility of an extended schoolyear*.

Here, although *the possibility of an extended schoolyear* may be new information to the hearer, or 'hearer-new' (Prince 1992), the description provided in the NP is sufficient to fully and uniquely identify the possibility in question, hence the felicity of the definite.

Other instances of the definite article marking NPs that represent hearer-new yet uniquely identifiable entities include superlatives, cataphoric references, and deictics, as in (9a)-(9c), respectively (see Hawkins 1978):

- (9) a. *The best student in my history class* was at the party last night.
b. I propose *the following explanation* to account for these data...
c. *The example underneath it here* [pointing to overhead] shows that...

In (9a), *the best student in my history class* is semantically sufficient to uniquely identify a new entity which the hearer is being instructed to add to his or her model of the discourse. Similarly, *the following explanation* in (9b)

uniquely identifies the explanation, even though it is new to the hearer; it's the explanation that's about to be presented. Finally, in (9c) the speaker refers to an example while gesturing toward it; in the context of the gesture, the NP uniquely identifies the example being referred to. Again, in each case the unique identification licenses the use of the definite article. That is, despite the fact that the entity represents presumably new information for the hearer, the NP provides a sufficiently rich description of that entity to make it unique in the discourse model. Thus, in each case it is the hearer's (presumed) ability to uniquely identify the referent that makes the felicitous use of the definite possible.

4 Uniqueness and the definite article

Nonetheless, as we have seen, uniqueness is only a sufficient condition; the definite article may be felicitously used even in the absence of an assumption of uniqueness. Consider, for example, (10):

- (10) [At a table containing four pitchers of milk, all equidistant from the hearer] Please pass *the milk*.

Here, the NP typically is not taken to be specifying the entire uniquely identifiable quantity of milk, but rather some non-unique unit thereof. Notice, however, that in this case not only is the relevant unit of milk not uniquely identified by the definite NP, it is also non-unique in a more general sense: that is, it is not relevantly differentiable from any other unit of milk present. If the units are individuated in some relevant way, the non-unique definite reference becomes infelicitous (cf. Kadmon 1990). Thus, consider (10) again in a context where it is mutually known that two of the four pitchers contain skim milk and two contain whole milk; in this case, the quantities of milk are no longer undifferentiated, and the use of the definite article is no longer felicitous without additional identifying description. If, on the other hand, the units of milk are differentiated only by virtue of being in, say, different-colored pitchers, the utterance is again felicitous, since the units are not differentiated in any way that is relevant to the speaker's perceived intent. Thus, it is the inferred intent of the speaker that will determine whether the use of the definite conveys a reference to the totality of the uniquely identifiable quantity (cf. Clark & Marshall 1981, *inter alia*) or a reference to some subset thereof which is not relevantly differentiable for the purposes of the exchange.

This use of the article is not restricted to mass nouns like *milk*, but applies as well to plural NPs used to refer to sets of countable but undifferentiated entities. So, again in the context of a dinner table, a speaker can say *Pass the rolls* to refer to some subset of dinner rolls, e.g. one of three baskets of rolls

on the table. The singular, however, cannot be analogously used to request a single roll, as in (11):

(11) [At a table containing four baskets of rolls] #Please pass *the roll*.

Likewise, in (12) there is no suggestion that every mountain in Switzerland seen by the speaker appears in the photograph:

(12) When I was traveling through Switzerland last year, I took a beautiful photograph of *the mountains*.

Again, it is the inferred intent of the speaker that determines whether the definite conveys a reference to the totality of the set or to some undifferentiated subset thereof.

Similarly, there is a restricted class of uses of singular NPs containing the definite article that do not require uniqueness to guarantee felicity, as illustrated in (13):

- (13) a. As soon as my cousin arrived in Santiago, she broke her foot and had to spend a week in *the hospital*.
- b. Your 10:00 appointment – a Mr. Johanson – said he'd be late because he had to stop at *the bank* first.
- c. My history professor announced to the class today that he wasn't going to give us a final. He said that, while waiting in line at *the grocery store*, he realized that he already had enough information to assign us a grade.

In each of the above cases, the definite NP – *the hospital*, *the bank*, and *the grocery store*, respectively – refers to some non-unique and not necessarily familiar entity, yet the use of the definite is felicitous. Notice, however, that these NPs are used to refer to locations that are not relevantly differentiable from other locations denoted by the same NP (cf. Givón 1978). That is, in (13a) the hospital in question is not relevantly differentiable from any other hospital for the purposes of the exchange; what is being conveyed is not that the speaker's cousin spent a week in a particular hospital, but rather that she was laid up for a week. For this reason, a sentence like *My cousin had to go to the hospital today* used in a context where the particular hospital in question is not uniquely identifiable will always convey that the cousin was in the hospital in some stereotypical capacity, i.e. as either a patient or a visitor; it would be infelicitous, for example, if the cousin were there as an architect designing a new wing (cf. Stvan 1993). Moreover, adding a modifier results in infelicity:

(14) #While in Santiago, Bill broke his foot and was rushed to the big hospital.

Here, the hearer is licensed to assume that the modifier is relevant (in accordance with the maxim of Relation (Grice 1975)). However, the modifier in (14) could only be relevant if it distinguishes this hospital from others, in which case the hospital in question is no longer undifferentiable and, in the absence of unique identifiability, the conditions for the felicitous use of the definite have not been met. Hence, infelicity results. To put it another way, since the modifier is presumed to be relevant, it must be the case that it matters which hospital, or at least what type of hospital, is under discussion – i.e., that it is big. Thus, the condition of not being relevantly differentiable is not met, and the hearer must assume that the other condition for the felicitous use of the definite applies – i.e., that the hospital be uniquely identifiable. In the absence of a uniquely identifiable hospital, the utterance in (14) is simply infelicitous.

Other examples of definite NPs used to refer to locations that are not relevantly differentiable from others denoted by the same NP are given in (15):

- (15) a. This afternoon I went to *the park*.
b. Johnny, go stand in *the corner*.
c. Put this book on *the bookshelf*, please.

These sentences may be felicitously uttered in the absence of a uniquely identifiable park, corner, or bookshelf, respectively.

It has been suggested to us by Paul Kay, Tadashi Kumagai and others that the use of definite NPs to denote non-unique locations such as those in (13) and (15) may be explained in terms of frames, in the sense of Fillmore (1977, 1987). For example, in (13a) the mention of Santiago may give rise to a frame for a typical city, which includes a hospital. However, this does not seem to account for all cases:

- (16) a. The first thing we did upon arriving in Santiago was to go to the park and have a relaxing picnic lunch.
b. When I was six years old, I had to spend a night in the hospital, and I was terrified.

In (16a), use of *the park* seems felicitous despite the fact that there is typically more than a single park within a given city. In (16b), there is no mention of a city or any similar scene to give rise to a frame that might plausibly contain a hospital.

Nor, alternatively, is it the case that the definite NP is licensed by virtue of itself calling up a frame of prototypical entities and events. As discussed earlier, use of *go to the hospital* in a context where the relevant hospital is non-unique may indeed suggest a prototypical hospital visit (i.e., either as a

patient or visitor) because of the pragmatic restriction against the particular hospital in question being relevant. However, such uses need not always involve prototypical entities and events, so long as the particular referent remains irrelevant:

- (17) Somebody left their shopping cart outside here where it could roll into a car. As a good citizen, I'll take it inside. I'll only be a minute; I'll just leave it up front near the cash register.

Here, the definite *the cash register* is felicitous even in a context where there are quite likely a number of cash registers, despite the fact that bringing in a shopping cart from outside and leaving it nearby is not a prototypical event with respect to any plausible frame for a cash register. All that matters is that, in this context, it is irrelevant for the purposes of the exchange which particular cash register the cart is left near.

Notice also that the locations in question needn't be inherently undifferentiable. Clearly hospitals, for example, are unique and differentiable from one another; however, in the utterances in question, they are not differentiable in any way that is relevant to the discourse at hand. Thus, the discourse context and the speaker's inferred intent are crucial to the felicity of the definite. Consider (18a)-(18b), each uttered in, first, a room containing three identical windows, and second, a room containing three windows of different shapes and sizes, and with different-colored curtains:

- (18) a. It's stuffy in here. Can somebody please open *the window*?
b. Next week I'm going to start redecorating this room. #I'll start by replacing *the window*.

In either context, (18a) is perfectly felicitous, given that the windows are in either case undifferentiated with respect to the purpose at hand; it makes no difference whether the windows are differentiable by their appearance. Notice also that the hearer might felicitously respond by opening more than one window; that is, a single unique referent need not be intended or inferred. On the other hand, (18b) is infelicitous in either context, due to the fact that it is crucially relevant which window is being referred to. Similarly, while *Mr. Johanson just went to the bank* may be felicitously used in the absence of a uniquely identifiable bank, *Mr. Johanson just robbed the bank* may not. Thus, the felicity of such utterances is crucially dependent upon the beliefs of the speaker and hearer regarding the relevance of unique identification of the particular entity being referred to.

Finally, consider again (2b), repeated here as (19):

- (19) [Hotel concierge to guest, in a lobby with four elevators] You're in Room 611. Take *the elevator* to the sixth floor and turn left.

Here, a non-unique elevator can be felicitously referred to using the definite article. However, it has been pointed out to us by Bill Ladusaw that, in the absence of uniqueness, the definite may be used only for those conveyances that move along a regular, pre-established path, as illustrated in (20) and (21) below:

- (20) a. To get to Dr. Smith's office, I suggest taking the stairs.
b. To get to Dr. Smith's office, I suggest taking the bus.
c. To get to Dr. Smith's office, I suggest taking the train.
- (21) a. #To get to Dr. Smith's office, I suggest taking the car.
b. #To get to Dr. Smith's office, I suggest taking the bike.
c. #To get to Dr. Smith's office, I suggest taking the taxi.

In (20), the sentence-final definites each represent an entity which follows a predetermined route between the two relevant points. It is this path, rather than the entity itself, which is uniquely identifiable. In contrast, the examples in (21) evoke no such established path; in the absence of a uniquely identifiable car, bike, or taxi, therefore, these utterances are infelicitous. Note that for this reason, (22a) is unremarkable, in contrast to (22b):

- (22) a. To get to Ludington, we took the ferry.
b. ?To get to Ludington, we took the boat.

In (22b), the suggestion seems to be either that the speaker owns the relevant boat or that there is an established boat line that travels regularly to Ludington. Here again, the context and the interlocutors' beliefs conspire to determine the felicity of the definite.

5 Conclusion

We have seen that none of the previous analyses can account for all uses of the definite article in English. We have shown, first, that familiarity and identifiability are not equivalent, and have discussed a number of cases in which an unfamiliar entity may be referred to using the definite article if it is nonetheless uniquely identifiable. We have also shown that a familiarity-based account provides neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for the felicitous use of the definite article, while an approach based on unique identifiability provides sufficient but not necessary conditions for use. Specifically, the definite article may be used whenever the intended referent is believed to be uniquely identifiable in the discourse context. As we have seen, however, there are also cases in

which the definite article may be used to refer to non-unique referents. In all such cases, not only must the referent not be uniquely identifiable, but there must in fact be no relevant basis for differentiating it from other referents denoted by the NP. We have identified two such uses: plural or mass NPs, in which a definite may be used to refer to some subset of the mass or group denoted by the NP, and singular NPs, in which a definite may be used to refer to some location of the type denoted by the NP.

While there is clearly more to be said on the subject of definiteness, we have shown that no single factor proposed – familiarity, uniqueness, or relevance – can alone account for the full distribution of the definite article in English. In particular, pragmatic factors such as the inferred intent of the speaker and the differentiability of referents in context contribute crucially to the interpretation of the definite article.

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