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Definiteness

Christopher Lyons

This textbook investigates definiteness both from a comparative and a theoretical point of view, showing how languages express definiteness and what definiteness is. It surveys a large number of languages to discover the range of variation in relation to definiteness and related grammatical phenomena: demonstratives, possessives, personal pronouns. It outlines work done on the nature of definiteness in semantics, pragmatics and syntax, and develops an account on which definiteness is a grammatical category represented in syntax as a functional head (the widely discussed D). Consideration is also given to the origins and evolution of definite articles in the light of the comparative and theoretical findings. Among the claims advanced are that definiteness does not occur in all languages though the pragmatic concept which it grammaticalizes probably does, that many languages have definiteness in their pronoun system but not elsewhere, that definiteness is not inherent in possessives, and that definiteness is to be assimilated to the grammatical category of person.

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*To the memory of my parents,
Edith and Patrick Lyons*

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PREFACE

This book is primarily a survey, but, unlike some other topic-based books in this series, it surveys two areas. First, it offers an account of the range of variation displayed by languages in relation to definiteness and related grammatical concepts. Most languages do not have “articles”, and in those that do they vary strikingly in both their form and their range of use. All languages have demonstratives, personal pronouns, possessives, and other expressions which either seem to be inherently definite or to interact in interesting ways with definiteness; but again, there is considerable variation in the ways in which these expressions relate to definiteness. Second, the book gives a (very selective) outline of the theoretical literature on definiteness. This literature is vast, consisting both of direct accounts of definiteness and of work mainly concerned with other phenomena on which definiteness impinges. Both the cross-linguistic survey and the theoretical survey are introductory and far from complete, and many of the choices I have made in reducing the material to manageable proportions are no doubt arbitrary. This is true particularly as regards the literature, where I have had to omit much which I see as important, and it is essential that the reader follow up further references given in the works I do refer to.

This is not just a survey, however. I am much too interested in the topic not to want to present my own view of what definiteness is, and I believe the work gains in coherence from the aim of reaching and defending (if in outline) a preferred account. Chapters 7 to 9, in particular, contain much discussion of the approach I believe to be the most promising. But in the earlier chapters too, I have not hesitated to advance far-reaching claims anticipating this approach. The view of definiteness I propose may be wrong, of course, but it will have achieved its purpose if a student reading my proposals is spurred to investigate further and show their inadequacy. My aim in this book is not to present a set of facts and analyses to be learned, but to offer a body of ideas to be thought about and improved upon.

The investigation of definiteness necessarily takes the reader into several domains of inquiry, some of which (like semantics and syntax) are highly technical. While I assume some familiarity on the part of the reader with the principles and

Preface

methods of linguistics, I do not assume advanced competence in these domains, and I have given at appropriate points brief outlines of essentials and references to further reading, where possible at an elementary level. But it must be stressed that the interested reader would need to follow up these references, sometimes to a fairly advanced point, in order to come fully to grips with the issues in question. I have in general maintained neutrality between different theoretical frameworks, except as regards syntax, where I assume the principles-and-parameters approach which is the most highly developed and best known. Most of the text of this book was written at a time when the current “minimalist” version of this approach was in its infancy and there were few accessible accounts available of this framework to refer the reader to, so I have taken little account of minimalism. But there is little in the syntax discussed here which cannot be easily recast in this paradigm.

There has been much debate over the years on the relative merits of, on the one hand, the wide-ranging descriptive work of typological studies, and, on the other, the deep analysis of a smaller range of languages done in theoretical work. I firmly believe that descriptive breadth and analytical depth benefit one another, but that the latter must be the ultimate goal, and I hope that the gulf between these two approaches to language is narrower now than it was. The “new comparative linguistics” in generative work indicates a recognition among theorists of the value of cross-linguistic investigation, though some of it can be criticized as too selective in scope. But, to repeat a familiar point, our understanding of the way language works is deepened by bringing to bear serious analyses of languages, not mere observational facts. And even the best descriptive grammars are rarely adequate by themselves to provide the basis for an analysis of any depth of a specific aspect of linguistic structure. Indeed, even the descriptive observations and generalizations made in typological work must be treated with great caution, partly because the descriptive grammars on which they are based are often unclear on crucial points or analytically unsophisticated, partly because the typologist looking at unfamiliar languages in pursuit of a generalization is prone to the same inaccuracy as the theorist aiming to prove a point of theory. In my own cross-linguistic survey here, I too will certainly have included inaccuracies, and I urge the reader to treat it as a guide and starting point, not as fully reliable data.

Many people have helped me in various ways in the course of my writing this book, and I wish to thank in particular the following friends and colleagues who have read and commented on the manuscript or sections of it, or discussed particular points with me: Nigel Vincent, Deirdre Wilson, Noel Burton-Roberts, Kasia Jaszczolt. Most special thanks to Ricarda Schmidt for constant intellectual and moral support.

A couple of points concerning the presentation of the material should be noted. Where items of literature discussed exist in different versions, I have tried to refer to the most easily accessible version. In the case of doctoral theses subsequently published this means the formal publication. The effect is sometimes that my reference is to a version dated several years later than the version most commonly cited. Finally, a note on my use of gender-marked personal pronouns in describing conversational exchanges: I follow the convention that the speaker is, unless otherwise stated, female, and the hearer or addressee male.

ABBREVIATIONS

1	first person
1EXC	first person exclusive
1INC	first person inclusive
2	second person
3	third person
ABL	ablative case
ABS	absolutive or absolute case
ACC	accusative case
ADESS	adessive case
ANA, ana	anaphoric
ART	article
ASP	aspect
ASS1, Ass1	associated with first person
ASS1EXC	associated with first person exclusive
ASS1INC	associated with first person inclusive
ASS2, Ass2	associated with second person
ASS3	associated with third person
AUX	auxiliary
C	common gender
CL	clitic
CLASS	classifier, class marker
CONT	continuous aspect
DAT	dative case
DECL	declarative
DEF, Def	definite
DEM, Dem	demonstrative
DIR	direction
DIST	distal
DU	dual number
ELAT	elative case

ERG	ergative case
EXP	experiential aspect
F	feminine gender
FUT	future tense
GEN	genitive case
GENR	generic aspect
HAB	habitual aspect
HON	honorific
IMP	imperative
IMPF	imperfect, imperfective aspect
IMPRS	impersonal
INAN	inanimate
INDEF	indefinite
INESS	inessive case
INST	instrumental case
INTR	intransitive
IRR	irrealis
LINK	linker
LOC	locative case
M	masculine gender
N	neuter gender
NEG	negative
NOM	nominative case
NONPAST	non-past tense
NUN	nunation
OBJ	object
OBL	oblique case
PART	partitive case
PASS	passive voice
PAST	past tense
PERS	person
PL	plural number
POSS	possessive
PRES	present tense
PRF	perfective aspect
PRI	primary case
PROX, Prox	proximal
PRT	particle
REFL	reflexive
REL	relative marker

Abbreviations

SG, Sg	singular number
SUBJ	subject
TNS	tense
TOP	topic
WH	interrogative

The standard labels are used for syntactic categories (N, V, D and Det, Agr etc.). Any idiosyncratic or non-standard labels used are explained at the appropriate point in the text.

1

Basic observations

This chapter sets the scene by presenting some basic issues and ideas, which will be investigated in greater depth in the rest of the study. It begins by examining the concept of definiteness itself, to establish a preliminary account of what this concept amounts to. This is followed by consideration of the various types of noun phrase which are generally regarded as definite or indefinite – since definiteness and indefiniteness are not limited to noun phrases introduced by *the* or *a*. Finally, some basic ideas concerning the syntactic structure of noun phrases are presented in outline. English is taken as the starting point, with comparative observations on other languages where appropriate, because it is easier and less confusing to outline basic issues as they are instantiated in one language, where this can be done, than to hop from one language to another. For this purpose, English serves as well as any language, since it has readily identifiable lexical articles, which make definite and indefinite noun phrases on the whole easy to distinguish. It is important to bear in mind that the discussion in this chapter is preliminary, and aims at a tentative and provisional account of the points examined. Many of the proposals made here and solutions suggested to problems of analysis will be refined as the study progresses.

1.1 What is definiteness?

I begin in this section by attempting to establish in informal, pre-theoretical terms what the intuitions about meaning are that correspond to our terming a noun phrase “definite” or “indefinite”.

1.1.1 *Simple definites and indefinites*

In many languages a noun phrase may contain an element which seems to have as its sole or principal role to indicate the definiteness or indefiniteness of the noun phrase. This element may be a lexical item like the definite and indefinite articles of English (*the*, *a*), or an affix of some kind like the Arabic definite prefix *al-* and indefinite suffix *-n*. I shall refer to such elements by the traditional label **article**, without commitment at this stage to what their grammatical status actually

is. Of course not all noun phrases contain an article – probably in any language – though the definite–indefinite distinction is never thought of as applying only to those that do. This is clear from the fact that in English *this house* would usually be judged (at least by linguists and grammarians) to be definite and *several houses* indefinite; judgments would probably be more hesitant over *every house*. Noun phrases with *the* and *a* and their semantic equivalents (or near-equivalents) in other languages can be thought of as the basic instantiations of definite and indefinite noun phrases, in that the definiteness or indefiniteness stems from the presence of the article, which has as its essential semantic function to express this category.¹ I shall refer to such noun phrases as **simple definites** and **simple indefinites**, and I limit the discussion to them in this section to avoid any possibility of disagreement over the definite or indefinite status of example noun phrases.

So the question we are concerned with is: What is the difference in meaning between *the car* and *a car*, between *the greedy child* and *a greedy child*, between *the hibiscus I planted last summer* and *a hibiscus I planted last summer*? Many traditional grammars would give answers like the following: *The* indicates that the speaker or writer is referring to a definite or particular car etc., not just any. But apart from being rather vague, this answer is quite inaccurate. If I say *I bought a car this morning*, I am not referring to just any car; the car I bought is a particular one, and is distinguished in my mind from all others. Yet *a car* is indefinite. There is in fact no general agreement on what the correct answer is, but two major components of meaning have been much discussed, and I introduce these in 1.1.2 and 1.1.3 in relation to some illustrative English data.

1.1.2 Familiarity and identifiability

Continuing with the example just considered, compare the following two sentences:

- (1) I bought **a car** this morning.
- (2) I bought **the car** this morning.

The car here is in some sense more “definite”, “specific”, “particular”, “individualized” etc. than *a car*, but, as noted above, *a car* certainly denotes a particular or specific car as far as the speaker is concerned. The difference is that the reference of *the car* in (2) is assumed to be clear to the hearer as well as the speaker. This is the first crucial insight; whereas in the case of an indefinite noun phrase the speaker may be aware of what is being referred to and the hearer probably

¹ We will see, however, that articles can encode more than definiteness or indefiniteness, and that they have been argued to have a quite different principal function, at least in some languages.