

English Definite Article

"the " in Term of Definiteness With Reference to Literary Works:

A Linguistic Study

دراسة لغوية لأداة التعريف (أل) في اللغة الانجليزية بالإشارة إلى أعمال أدبية

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to investigate the concept of definiteness which is of special interest because it seems to be discourse - pragmatic in nature but it has semantic impact. In English, definiteness is syntactically encoded by the definite article "the". The definite article can be discussed on different perspectives: syntactic, semantic, discourse- pragmatic, and cognitive. Much of the research into the meaning of the definite article "the" can be clustered under two main headings: theories that analyze the article in terms of unique identifiability and those that analyze "the" in terms of familiarity. This paper aims at showing that referential theories provide only partial accounts of the meaning and distribution of the article. In addition to its referential function, the definite article has another function, including notions such as: topic-comment, new-given information, presupposition – focus, prominence, and viewpoint. Focusing principally on the definite article, the paper investigates that literary works may be used to indicate certain entities that have not been mentioned beforehand in the texts. For this reason, evidences drawn from different literary texts have been analyzed depending on discourse-pragmatic and cognitive frameworks which are important for understanding the many subtle shades of meaning conveyed by the definite article.

الخلاصة

يتقصى هذا البحث مفهوم الوضوح (التعريف) والذي له اهتمام خاص لانه يبدو بطبيعته تداولي \ خطابي لكن له تأثير دلالي. يُشار إلى التعريف في اللغة الانجليزية بشكل نحوي بأداة التعريف (أل) . أداة التعريف يُمكن أن تُناقش على المنظورات المختلفة: نحوي، دلالي، خطابي- تداولي، وإدراكي. تركز معظم البحث إلى معنى أداة التعريف (أل) والتي تُكون مُتَجَمَّعة تحت عنوانين رئيسيين: النظريات التي تُحلل أداة التعريف (أل) من ناحية كونها (فريدة) وتلك التي تُحلل "أل" من ناحية كونها مألوفة. يهدف البحث إلى إظهار بان التي نظريات الإشارة referential تُزوّد حسابات جزئية فقط لمعنى وتوزيع أداة التعريف (أل). بالإضافة إلى وظيفة الإشارة، أداة التعريف لها وظيفة أخرى، تتضمن الأفكار مثل: موضوع- تعليق، معلومات المعطاة من قبل - الجديدة، افتراض - تركيز، الأهمية خطابية، وجهة نظر. بالتركيز أساساً على أداة التعريف، يتحرى البحث الأعمال الأدبية التي يمكن أن تُشخص بعض الكيانات التي لم تُذكر مقدماً في النصوص. لهذا السبب، سحبت الأدلة من النصوص الأدبية المختلفة وحُللت بالاعتماد على أطر الخطاب -التداولية والإدراكية والتي هي مهمة لفهم العديد من المعاني الغير ملحوظة والمعبّر عنها بأداة التعريف (أل).

1.2 Definition of Definiteness

There are different definitions introduced by different authors. Some consider definiteness as a discourse – pragmatic property while others denote it as a semantic feature.

One definition of definiteness, given by Chafe (1976:28), is a discourse-pragmatic notion which is identifiable. A definite referent is one which the speaker assumes that the hearer will be able to identify, i.e. to locate in his or her current mental representation.

Similarly, Von Heusinger and Kaiser (2003:44) define definiteness as a discourse-pragmatic property which indicates that the discourse referent associated with a definite expression can be identified with an already introduced discourse item. It is a property of the referents set in the discourse. A definite singular expression unambiguously denotes or refers to one object, that is, the object can be identified as the only one that is denoted by the noun phrase.

On the other hand, definiteness is a semantic feature which makes reference to the knowledge state of both the speaker and the hearer concerning a unique discourse referent (Ko et al, 2008: 118)

Quirk et al (1985:265) and Peterson (1974:97) state that the definite phrase is one, which refers to something that can be identified uniquely in the contextual or general knowledge shared by speaker and hearer. In other words, the phrase is known both to speaker and addressee.

A definite noun phrase is used when a speaker makes the presupposition that the referent of the expression is accessible to the hearer. That is, the speaker assumes that there is a unique referent that the hearer can identify, either (i) because the referent was previously mentioned in the context of discourse, or (ii) because the referent is part of the interlocutors shared knowledge, or (iii) because there is enough descriptive content in the sentence to identify the referent: the referent becomes identifiable as the sentence is processed (Hawkins, 1978:167-168). Definiteness in English is expressed by the determiner *the*.

(1) The earth revolves around the sun.

(2) She bought the car she wanted.

In (1), the referents are part of the interlocutors, shared knowledge, while in (2), the relative clause provides enough context for the referent to become identifiable as the sentence is processed. (Guerin, 2007:539)

Lyons (1999:278) argues that definiteness is a grammaticalization category: that originally definite NPs were understood to denote identifiable entities, but as a consequence of the category becoming grammaticalized have acquired other use. In other words, definiteness is a category concerned with the grammaticalization of identifiability and non identifiability of referents on the part of a speaker or addressee.

1.3 Definiteness: A Syntactic Perspective

Syntactically, in English all nouns require an article, definite or indefinite, preceding the whole noun phrase. The prototype of definiteness is the definite article *the* . The choice of the article depends on the knowledge of the speaker of his/her own knowledge and of others' knowledge as well (Abbott, 2005:2).

Quirk *et al.* (1985:266) state that the definite article '*the*' is used before nouns which can be identified in a specific context due to their being active in the discourse or identifiable due to the shared knowledge of both speaker and hearer. The referent can be a person (*the man*), a group of people (*the policemen*), an object (*the table*), a group of objects (*the tables*), an abstraction (*the idea*), or a group of abstractions (*the fears*).

1.4 Uses of Definite Article

There are different uses of the definite article "the", some of which are exemplified below.

1.4.1 Anaphoric Use

One representative typology of sources of definiteness is that provided by (Hawkins 1991:408). The definite article '*the*' implies anaphoric reference. The term *anaphora* implies that reference to a noun preceded by '*the*' is known from the linguistic context (Quirk *et. al.*, 1985:267). That is, the information given by the speaker earlier in the discourse provides the listener with an understanding of the referent to which '*the*' refers. Anaphoric referents may be either direct or indirect. For example, in the sentence

(3) John bought a TV and a video recorder, but he returned **the** video recorder.

'*The*' expresses direct anaphora because 'the' directly refers to video recorder. In contrast, in the sentence '

(4) John bought a bicycle, but when he rode it one of **the** wheels came off.

'*The*' is used to express indirect anaphora (bicycle+ wheel). The reference of '*the*' is indirect because '*the*' does not directly refer to the '*bicycle*', but rather makes use of general knowledge that bicycle has wheels (ibid.)

Lyons (1999: 4) states that the definite noun phrases that refer back to an antecedent in the discourse (both description and antecedent evoke the same entity) express anaphoric references.

(5) An elegant, dark-haired woman, a well-dressed man with dark glasses, and two children entered the compartment. I immediately recognized **the** woman. **The** children also looked vaguely familiar.

The referents of *the woman* and *the children* are familiar not from the physical situation but from the linguistic context; they have been mentioned

before. In this example the previous mention takes place in an earlier sentence uttered by the same speaker, but it could equally well occur in part of the discourse spoken by another person, as in the following exchange (ibid.)

(6) A: An old man, two women and several children were already there when I arrived.

B: Did you recognize the old man?

1.4.2 Associative Anaphoric Use

Speaker and hearer may have (shared) knowledge of the relations between certain objects evoked by the discourse (the triggers) and their components or attributes (the associate): associative anaphoric uses of definite noun phrases exploit this knowledge (Lyons, 1999: 4).

(7) I had to get a taxi from the station. On the way the driver told me there was a bus strike.

Example (7) is bridging cross-reference or associative use, and can be thought of as a combination of the anaphoric and general knowledge types. In (7) the driver has not been mentioned before, but there has been mention of a taxi, and it is part of our general knowledge that taxis have drivers. The idea is that the mention of a taxi conjures up for the hearer all the things that are associated with taxis (a driver, wheels, seats, the fare etc.), and any of these things can then be referred to by means of a definite noun phrase. So the referent of the driver is familiar through association with the antecedent a taxi (ibid.).

1.4.3 Immediate Situation Use

Quirk *et al.* (1985:266) explain that the referent marked by the definite article '*the*' is known from the immediate situation. For example, in

(8) The roses are very beautiful.

If this utterance is said in a garden where both the speaker and the listener are present, the roses are readily identifiable.

The next two uses of definite noun phrases identified by Hawkins (1991: 408) are used to refer to an object in the situation of utterance. The referent may be visible, or its presence may be inferred visible situation use. This type of use occurs when the object referred to is visible to both speaker and hearer, as in the following examples:

(9) A. Please, pass me the bucket.

B. Put it on the table.

The definite noun phrases whose referent is a constituent of the immediate situation in which the use of the definite noun phrase is located, without necessarily being visible (Lyons, 1999: 4)

(10) Just give the shelf a quick wipe, will you, before I put this vase on it.

(11) Put these clean towels in the bathroom please.

Examples (10) and (11) show situational uses of *the*, in that the physical situation in which the speaker and hearer are located contributes to the familiarity of the referent of the definite noun phrase. In (10) the situation is the immediate, visible one; the shelf is familiar to speaker and hearer in that it is before their eyes. In (11) the situation is still relatively immediate, though the referent of the definite noun phrase is probably not visible; in a particular house, the hearer would most naturally take it that the reference is to the bathroom of that house. (ibid.)

1.4.4. Larger Situation Uses

Hawkins (1978: 410) lists two classes of definite noun phrases that are used in situations in which the speaker appeals to the hearer's knowledge of entities existing in the non-immediate or larger situation of utterance—knowledge they share by being members of the same community.

There is the case in which both the speaker and the hearer know about the existence of the referent, as in the example below, in which it is assumed that speaker and hearer share

(12) The moon was very bright last night.

This sentence can be regarded as a situational use in which the situation is the whole world, or as a use in which familiarity stems from general knowledge. Thus the moon is taken to refer to the

particular moon associated with this planet, or to a unique entity forming part of the hearer's general knowledge (Schaeffer, 1997:34).

The identifiable referents may be due to a larger situation (knowledge shared) between the speaker and listener. (Quirk et al, 1985: 267)

(13) I hear the prime minister behaved outrageously again today.

In (13) the relevant situation is wider ; in a particular country, the reference to the prime minister would normally be taken to be to the prime minister of that country; the individual concerned is not personally known to the hearer, but is familiar in the sense of being known to exist and probably known by report.

1.5 Definiteness: A Semantic Perspective

Defining definiteness is often tied to defining the semantic content of the definite article. Definiteness is a discourse-related semantic feature: it is related to the knowledge state of the speaker and hearer in the discourse (Ionin, 2003: 3). As shown by the definition, based on the feature [+definite] reflects the knowledge state of both speaker and hearer.

If a NP is marked as [+definite], this indicates that the speaker assumes that the hearer shares the speaker's presupposition of the existence of unique individual in the set denoted by the NP.

1.5.1 Semantic Theories of Definiteness

Several theories of definiteness have characterized the definite article in terms of *uniqueness, familiarity, inclusiveness and identifiability*. They are as follows:

1.5.1.1 Uniqueness

Uniqueness is crucially defined as the property of being (believed by the speaker to be) uniquely identifiable to the hearer (Lewis, 1979:340). The uniqueness theory claims that felicitous use of "*the*" requires that "*the referent of the NP be uniquely identifiable to the hearer*" (Birner and Ward, 1994: 93). For a referent to be identifiable, it is generally agreed that the referent must be unique. Uniqueness theories regard definiteness as indicating that the referent is unique with respect to some pragmatically given domain (<http://www.balshanut.wordpress.com>).

The uniqueness theory has its roots in the logical tradition and is usually traced to Bertrand Russell, who argued that the definite article requires existence and uniqueness. The existence and uniqueness of the referent of a definite noun phrase are part of the truth conditions of the sentence. (Lyons, 1999: 254) For example,

(14) The King of France is bald.

According to Russell this sentence implies three things:

- (i) There is a King of France.
- (ii) There is only one King of France.
- (iii) This individual is bald.

He says that *The King is bald* means there exists a king, this king is unique, and he is bald. By and large, this seems to be an accurate rendering of the truth conditions of *The King is bald*. Thus the use of the indefinite article, as in (i), merely asserts the existence of an individual meeting the description King of France, but the definite article also asserts his uniqueness. (Lyons, 1999: 254)

Strawson (1950:321-323) addresses Russell's (1905:483) claim that existence and uniqueness of the referent are part of the assertion of the sentence containing the definite description. He agrees

that in order for the sentence to be true the existence and uniqueness condition must hold. The disagreement is in the case those conditions do not hold. Discussing the sentence “The king of France is wise,” Strawson (ibid: 324) argues that the sentence is not false, but rather is neither true nor false, that is, it has no truth value. The view that existence and uniqueness are part of what the sentence *presupposes*, and not of what it asserts, has since then become the accepted view. It is worth noting that Frege (1892) (as cited in Lyons, 1999: 254) also described existence and uniqueness as the presuppositions of using a definite noun phrase.

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 (14): (Abbott, 2005:2)

(15) Please put this on the table.

(15) 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.

(16) 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 noun phrases 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. (ibid)

On the other hand, a particularly prominent account of the uniqueness perspective is Hawkins (1978) and (1991). Hawkins (1991:414) defines the

definite article in the Russellian terms of existence and uniqueness, relatives to the domains of reference within a dynamic modal of on –going discourse, which are mutually manifest to speaker and hearer on –line. The basic idea is that the use of a definite is felicitous if, within a pragmatically determined domain, there is exactly one entity satisfying the description. Pragmatic domains, called P-sets, are sets of entities structuring the universe of discourse, and are provided by either the previous discourse, or the utterance situation, or general knowledge about relations between entities. The meaning of the definite article is defined relative to a P-set:

The conventionally implicates that there is some subset of entities, {P}, in the universe of discourse which is mutually manifest to Speaker and Hearer on-line, and within which definite referents exist and are unique. (Hawkins, 1991: 414)

‘Subset of entities’, of ‘pragmatically delimited sets’ (P-sets), are best understood as the universe of discourse, carved up on the ‘grounds for knowing other minds’ (Givón, 1989:207): the previous discourse set, the immediate situation set, general knowledge sets, and a line of associative sets stemming from these. For example, the noun phrase *the professor* in (17) below may be felicitously uttered if there is a unique professor within the P-set established by the previous discourse. But it may as well be felicitously used if the situation or general world knowledge provides an appropriate P-set (Hawkins, 1991:408). Students arriving for a new class may, e.g., ask

(17) *"Who is the professor?"*

because the situation provides a unique professor. Similarly, if a university class has been mentioned in the previous discourse, the use of *the professor* is felicitous because one knows that university classes usually have a unique professor. The appropriate P-set may also be explicitly mentioned in the definite NP, as in

(18) *The professor of my linguistics class,*

the P-set corresponding to the speaker's linguistic class. This way a definite NP may even re-establish a previous discourse set:

(19) *The professor we have just been talking about.* (ibid.416)

In a similar vein, Lyons (1999:264) emphasizes that the definite article involves existence and uniqueness and " *it carries a conventional implicature that there is some pragmatic set accessible to hearer and speaker within which existence and uniqueness is held*".

It is stated by Trenkic (2002:109) that the definite article regards the identifiability of referents in discourse and the referent is identifiable if the speaker wants to refer to it and assumes hearer to uniquely identify it. The referent can be uniquely identifiable only if it exists and unique in pragmatically confined set shared by speaker and hearer.

In addition, Ionin (2003:7) states that previous discourse is not always necessary for establishing uniqueness. In some cases, the uniqueness presupposition is satisfied as a result of mutual world knowledge .for example,

(20) The winner of the tournament will receive a prize.

In this example, mutual world knowledge makes the use of the definite article appropriate because both the hearer shares the knowledge that the tournaments or competitions have a winner, and that one will also have one.

As observed, the uniqueness of the definite article is usually relative to a particular context, but it can be absolute. This is the case with nouns which are inherently unique, denoting something of which there is only one. One can speak of *thesun* and *the universe*, but not normally of *a sun* or *a universe*; the qualification is important because although for most purposes one thinks of sun and universe as the only entities to which those names apply, there are situations in which one might speak of sun as one of many or entertain the possibility of their existing another universe. (Lyons, 1999: 8)

1.5.1.2. Inclusiveness

It might seem that uniqueness which presented in previous section would necessarily be confined to singular NPs. However, as argued by Hawkins (1978: 160), 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. For example:

(21) Bring us the wickets in after the game of cricket.

In the example, the definite article is used with plural noun (wickets) refers to six wickets. Thus, the notion of totality in plural nouns and mass nouns when used with definite article is similar to the

universal quantifier (all) and the wickets may be understood as the unique maximal set of wickets by virtue of the context.

Inclusiveness is particularly appropriate for uses of definiteness with plural and mass noun phrases. Inclusiveness expresses the fact that the reference is made to the totality of the objects or mass in the context which satisfy the description (Lyons, 1999: 11).

Hawkins explains this with the help of the inclusiveness of definite reference:

*...the overall regularity for the seems to be that the reference must be to
The totality of objects or mass, whatever the number or the size of this totality....
This property of the definite article to refer to all objects or all the mass in the
Pragmatically limited domain of quantification, whereupon the sentence as a whole
makes some claim about these objects, I shall refer to as 'inclusiveness'. This term is
intended to capture the fact that the reference is all-inclusive, i.e. all the objects in
the shared set satisfying the descriptive predicate are being referred to, and none are
being excluded.*
(1978:160-161)

In contrast to the uniqueness theory is the inclusiveness theory, which applies to groups of items. With this theory, a speaker refers to a totality or an aggregate of objects that satisfy his or her description. The referenced object is not unique because it refers to a group of objects. For example, if one mentions dogs, one could be referring to a group of ten golden retrievers, a group of five poodles and five schnauzers, or any possible dogs. The only entity that the listener can comprehend is that he/she is referring to a group of four-legged animals, with wagging tails, and a coat of hair. In addition, at a party, the host may exclaim. (Lyons, 1999: 11)

(22) Hope your glasses are empty because we're serving the juice.

The juice in this sentence is not unique, not identifiable (assume it is in the refrigerator), and not familiar (it is still in the refrigerator). In this usage, the definite article is a type of universal quantifier meaning something like, 'all the juice.' Hence, the speaker is not referring to one specific or identifiable beer, but just the collection of beer in general (i.e., all of the juice in the cooler) (ibid).

1.5.1.3 Familiarity

One way to view definiteness is to relate it to the notion of familiarity (Christophersen 1939, Hawkins 1978, Heim 1988). The general idea is that a definite noun phrase is used to refer to a referent that has already been introduced into the discourse at the time the definite expression is used. Heim (1988:164) characterizes definiteness in terms of the traditional concept of familiarity: a definite is used when the referent is familiar at the current stage of the discourse, and an indefinite is used to introduce a novel referent. Familiarity is what enables the hearer to identify the referent (Lyons, 1999:3).

Familiarity theories claim that felicitous use of *the* requires only that the referent have been already introduced into the discourse: "*the article the brings it about that to the potential meaning (the idea) of the word is attached a certain association with previously acquired knowledge*" (Christophersen, 1939:72). There is no systematic uniqueness implication associated with the referent of a definite NP under the familiarity view (Heim 1988:27–33). Familiarity and unique identifiability are not equivalent notions (Lyons, 1999: 226). They are nonetheless very closely related:

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.

(Birner and Ward, 1994: 96)

The familiarity theory is usually traced to Christophersen (1939:28), who argued that the distinction between definite and indefinite noun phrases has to do with whether the hearer was presumed to be acquainted with the referent. Compare the following two sentences:

(23) I bought **a car** this morning.

(24) 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 (24) 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 not, with a definite noun phrase this awareness is signalled as being shared by both participants. One would typically utter (23) where the car in question has no place yet in the hearer’s experience, and is being newly introduced to it. (24) would be used where the hearer knows or has seen the speaker’s new car. The car may be at the wheel right now, or they may be standing looking at it together in its drive; or it may be that the hearer has not yet seen the car in the speaker’s possession, but was aware that she had been looking over a particular car in a showroom recently. *The* signals that the entity denoted by the noun phrase is familiar to both speaker and hearer, and *a* is used where the speaker does not want to signal such shared familiarity. (Lyons,1999: 2-3)

Similarly, the notion of familiarity accounts for the usage of a definite expression in cases like the following sentences:

(25) I bought a hat and a dress yesterday. **The dress** is too short.

For (25) to be used felicitously, the object *the dress* has to be previously introduced into the discourse. After that, *the dress* is familiar. Both the speaker and the hearer know what it refers to within the domain of discourse (Abbott ,2005:4)

1.5.1.4 Identifiability

According to the identifiability theory, the definite article signals that the hearer can identify the referent of the noun phrase (Lyons,1999:5-6). It is a refining of the familiarity condition, stating that the definite article signals that the denoted entity is familiar. According to Lyons, “*This view of definiteness does not altogether reject familiarity. Rather, familiarity, where it is present, is what enables the hearer to identify the referent*” (ibid.3). Lyons (ibid.278) gives a reason in favor of identifiability saying that the semantic/pragmatic notion of definiteness plays a role even in languages with no overt marking of definiteness

Chafe (1976: 30) has suggested that the term identifiability is preferable to familiarity. The distinction is that the hearer may not necessarily *know* the referent, but definiteness signals that they are in a position to identify it. Identifiability can be related to the prior introduction of a referent in the discourse, the presence of the referent in the immediate situation, or the general knowledge of the hearer.

However, identifiability may not always be an adequate explanation of definiteness either. Lyons (1999: 227) notes that so-called associative uses are the most problematic. In the associative use, a noun phrase is considered definite by its relation to a previous referent as in 26:

(26) I took **a taxi** to the airport, but **the driver** got lost.

Here it is understood that the driver is connected to the previously mentioned taxi. However, other than linking him to the taxi, the hearer is in no position to *identify* the particular driver. In such a case, definiteness may indeed be more about quantification than identifiability. That is, the sentence merely expresses that the taxi had a driver.

Fraurud (1990: 398) has suggested, however, that the individuation of the referent may also be a factor. The identifiability approach tends to treat individuals as the prototypical referent, but individuals are identifiable in a different way from other kinds of entities such as classes and types, of which we may have general-lexical, but not personal, knowledge. Thus all that is necessary is to identify the driver as the taxi driver.

1.6 Definiteness : A Pragmatic Perspective

Definiteness plays a role in guiding the hearer through the organization of information in discourse, interacting therefore with other concepts and distinctions in the structure of communication. The behavior of definiteness in its discourse and sentence context is examined in the present section.

1.6.1 Discourse structure

One point to be evoked is the place of definiteness in the area of pragmatic theory which has been variously termed “discourse structure”, “information structure”. It is concerned with the ways in which sentences package the message conveyed so as to express the relationship between this message and its context or background.(Lambrecht, 1994: 45)

1.6.1.1 The organization of information

Information can be organized on certain oppositions which are **topic - comment, given – new, presupposition- focus**. But the variation in the use of these pairs of terms is considerable. To a large extent they are used interchangeably, though for some writers one opposition closely overlaps with another rather than being equivalent to it; and with each opposition there is variation over whether the terms are taken to denote linguistic expressions or the referents of these expressions(Lyons , 1999: 227)

Gundel (1985: 88) provides the following definitions for the topic and comment:

*Topic is an entity, E, is the topic of a sentence, S, if in using S
The speaker intends to increase the addressee's knowledge about, request
information about, or otherwise get the addressee to act with respect
to E. Comment is predication, P, is the comment of a sentence S, if, in
using S the Speaker intends P to be assessed relative to the topic of S*

Many sentences (or utterance) can be said to consist of two parts, a topic and a comment. The topic, typically but not exclusively a noun phrase, represents what the sentence is about. The comment is what is said about the topic(Lyons ,1999:227).For example:

(27)The burglar climbed out through a window

This sentence may be understood as a statement about the individual identified by the description *the burglar*, in which case this is the topic. What is said about the burglar that he climbed out through a window is the comment. In the usual case, the comment carries the main informative burden of the sentence (Lyons, 1999: 228).

The topic is the point of departure for the message. For this reason the topic is likely to be something the speaker can assume to be in the hearer's present consciousness, having already occurred in the discourse or being part of more general knowledge related to the material in the discourse. As Strawson (1964:99) puts it, making statement involves giving or adding information about what is a matter of standing current interest or concern. The topic is therefore often characterized as what is given, as opposed to the comment which is new information.

One can distinguish between given information which the speaker believes is already available to the hearer or new information which the speaker does not expect the hearer to already know. These types of information are encoded in sentence. Consider the exchange:

- (28) A. Who took the book?
B. Mary did.

In this example , B's utterance is made up of two pieces of information "Mary" which is new information , and "took the book" which is given information(Davies and Elder, 2004:46)

The **topic** in a unit of information is the information that is "given " treated as already known to the hearer –and that has other information building on it. The " comment " is " new" : it is the added information ;"new" includes what is important , as well as what is unfamiliar or not readily accessible to the hearer; it is often called "focus" (Halliday,2004:93) .But in fact topic- comment and given –new do not coincide exactly ,since there can be given material which is not topical. Consider the following sentence:

- (29) The burglar climbed in through the window Jean had forgotten to close.

Taking *the burglar* to be the topic, then the rest of the sentence is the comment. But this comment ,while new information , contains a definite noun phrase *the window Jean had forgotten to close* which has perhaps been mentioned before in the discourse and would therefore be given. The important point, however, is that topics are generally given. The topic expression foregrounds something already in the consciousness of the participants in order to make it the point of departure for some new information.

Another concept overlapping with given and topic is **presupposition**. The previous examples (27) and (29) can be thought of as answers to implicit *wh*-questions (such as *What did the burglar do?*). In such questions, the part which is not subject to interrogation is presupposed (here, that there was a burglar and that he or she did something). What is not presupposed is in **focus** ; the *wh*-expression represents the focus. This presupposition—focus partition then carries over to the declarative sentence which answers the question. So the topic, *the burglar* , is presupposed and the comment , *climbed out through a window* for example, is the focus .If , on the other hand, this declarative sentence is thought of as answering an implicit question *where did the burglar climb out?*, then only *through a window* is in focus, and *the burglar climbed out* is all presupposed and topical. (Lyons ,1999: 229)

The presupposition—focus or given—new partition largely determines the prosodic structure of the sentence/ utterance in English, so that new information is stressed and given information less prominent. In fact “focus” is sometimes defined as that part of a sentence which carries the main stress. This lesser prominence characterizing topical, and, more generally, given, content also shows up in the fact that noun phrases of this kind show a strong tendency to be pronominal, provided that their referents are salient to permit recovery of their descriptive content.(ibid.)

1.7 Definiteness : A Cognitive Perspective

One of the most relevant parameters relating to definiteness (Langacker, 1987: 116–134) is *perspective*, which subsumes the following facets:

1.7.1. Discourse prominence

Another case to be considered in relation to the discourse of definite article "the" to trigger the interpretation that a discourse entity is highly **prominent**, i.e., that the entity plays an important part in the broader discourse context.(Epstein ,2002: 349) An example is shown in (30),

(30) Hall has been thinking about God, psychiatry, analysis, fairy tales, dreams and the monkey trap. As a boy he saw a picture of a monkey trap in a book, and he has used it as a basis for a theory on human behavior. A monkey trap is a hollowed gourd with bait inside.

The definite article in the monkey trap is used to introduce an entity that will be the primary topic of concern in the immediately following discourse.

The analysis of high topicality (discourse prominence) is supported in (29) by the recurring mention the monkey trap, respectively, in the succeeding contexts. It is also worth noting that the next mention of the monkey trap occurs with an indefinite article (a monkey trap, in the second sentence of [29]). This evidence strongly suggests that the referent of the definite description in (29) cannot be uniquely identifiable since it is not treated that way by the writer even on subsequent mention. In this example, definite descriptions are used to introduce prominent entities (new topics) at the start of an episode within a narrative.(Epstein,2002 : 349-350)

1.7.2 Viewpoint

Langacker (1987: 118) states that viewpoint reflects the vantage point from which the scene is observed and its orientation with respect to the axes of visual field.

To organize the information in any discourse, it is important to contribute the shift in **point of view**. The literary work can reflect the point of view of the speaker or writer. This perspective is expressed by range of formal mechanisms for conveying distinct points of view, including the definite article. (Epstein ,2002 :363)

2.1 Text Analysis

Literary theorists have often pointed out that definite noun phrases in literary works may be used to refer to entities that have not been mentioned beforehand in the text. (Stanzel, 1981: 11).

In this section, texts from different literary works are analyzed in which NPs with "*the* " indicate that a discourse referent is accessible from the points of view, and with reference to other different oppositions of the organization of information in these texts.

TEXT 1

“The stranger came early in February , one wintry day , through a biting wind and a driving snow , the last snowfall of the year , over the down , walking from Brambelehurst railway station ,and carrying little black portmanteau in his thickly gloved hand.”(The Invisible Man 2008 :7)

The Invisible Man is a [science fiction novella](#) by [H.G. Wells](#) published in 1897. Wells' novel was originally serialised in Pearson's Magazine in 1897, and published as a novel the same year.

The opening sentence of **H. G. Wells's The Invisible Man** contains the definite noun phrase "the stranger" to introduce important new information at the start of a narrative which is not presented before, for the purpose of calling the reader's attention to that entity. The Invisible Man of the title is [Griffin](#), a scientist who theorises that if a person's [refractive index](#) is changed to exactly that of air and his body does not absorb or reflect light, then he will be [invisible](#). He successfully carries out this procedure on himself, but cannot become visible again, becoming mentally unstable as a result.

A clear illustration of a discourse prominent entity is one that is highly topical. Most interesting in this respect is entity entered into the discourse with an initial definite description in order to signal that it will be topic in the subsequent portion of text. While the noun phrase 'the stranger man' is the topic, 'came early in February' is the comment.

TEXT 2

"The young man dropped from the trackless tram just before it stopped at Castle-Bridge. He dropped off, ignoring the stream of late –afternoon traffic rolling in from the suburbs, bobbed and ducked the cars and buses, the big, rumbling delivery trucks, deaf of the shouts and curses of the drivers, and reached the pavement." (Alex La Guma [A Walk in the Night](#) 1962, 1).

In La Guma's novels, the [definite article](#) "the" is so [preponderant](#) it draws attention to itself. In certain instances, it is used in such a way that it constitutes a major cohesive link in the works. Normally, "**the**" is a word that is fraught with suggestions of [mutual intelligibility](#) between speaker and [interlocutor](#). It frequently works as a backward reference to something that the interlocutor or reader has a prior acquaintance with. An immediate example is the specific way in which Michael Adonis is introduced into the novella, [A Walk in the Night](#). The novella *A Walk in the Night* (1962) details the chain of events that occur after a black factory worker is fired from his job for talking back to his white supervisor. Collectively, the stories form a powerful indictment of the evils of apartheid, particularly in relation to the coloured community of Cape Town. The story opens with:

The young man dropped from the trackless tram just before it stopped at Castle-Bridge.

This opening sentence makes the point that "the young man" is an important link in the story that is about to be told and serves to [invigorate](#) the interest of the reader who must begin to wonder who this young man is that is introduced so familiarly to the speaker not to the hearer. And what about him? These questions are crucial because they engender the readers' willingness and presupposed certain things about the young man to participate in the never-ending task of unraveling heteroglossia. Additionally, "the young man" is the focus and the topic of this discourse since it is considered to be highly prominent in this novel.

TEXT 3

"I reckon we won't be out for Christmas," a character, inmate George Adams, said. "The boy said nothing" ([The Stone Country](#), 1967, 11).

Another instance of the use of the definite article is at the opening of [The Stone Country](#), La Guma's second novel. The novel is set in an Apartheid prison. Published in 1967, *The Stone Country* examines conditions in the South African prison system; the hierarchical social system,

racial segregation, and acceptance of brutality toward blacks make the prison a microcosm of South Africa as a whole.

Here again the article "the" is used as a foreshadowing gesture, as an attempt to draw special attention to a character and his worldview through a cohesive device. Who is the boy, and what about him? This is the boy (Albert March) who is called the Casbah Kid. He is the boy who at nineteen has committed murder, and when asked: "What did you do, Lighty?" "Murder," The boy spoke as if homicide was a normal activity, like going to the latrine or scratching an itch".

TEXT 4

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. (A Farewell to Arms,1929 :8)

Ernest Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms visits Frederic Henry, an American in the Italian army during World War I, and Catherine Barkley, a British nurse who falls in love with Henry after her fiancé's death in battle. Ernest Hemingway is honest about war, including its deserters, injury, incompetent leadership, and prostitution at the front. *A Farewell to Arms* is perhaps the best novel written about World War I and at the same time one of the most affecting love stories ever told.

The opening sentence of Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms contains referents of different NPs (river, plain, and mountain) with **the** are identifiable only to the narrator of the story, not to readers. This text can be interpreted as indicator of the narrator's point of view, in addition to portraying an entity as discourse prominent.

TEXT 5

The train went on up the track out of sight, around one of the hills of burnt timber. Nick sat down on the bundle of canvas and bedding the baggage man had pitched out of the door of the baggage car. There was no town, nothing but the rails and the burned-over country. The thirteen saloons that had lined the one street of Seney had not left a trace. The foundations of the Mansion House hotel stuck up above the ground. The stone was chipped and split by the fire. It was all that was left of the town of Seney. Even the surface had been burned off the ground (Big Two-Hearted River,1925: 5)

The opening sentence of Hemingway's short story "Big Two-Hearted River" emotionally wounded and disillusioned by World War I, Nick Adams returns to his home and leaves for the north Michigan woods on a camping trip. He leaves by himself, hoping that the routine of selecting a good place to camp, setting up a tent, fixing meals, and preparing for fishing will restore peace and a sense of balance to his traumatized soul.

The definite phrases *the train* and *the hills* are from the viewpoint of the main character. These entities are identifiable only to Nick, not to readers. The definite articles in **the train** and **the track** have the function of indicating that this portion of the discourse represents Nick's point of view, the main character in Hemingway's fiction. This interpretation of the passage is favored by the pragmatic context of (5), in particular, the occurrence of definite descriptions in the first sentence whose referents are not accessible to the reader plus the immediate mention of Nick at the beginning of the second sentence. If readers wish to participate in the story, they have to adopt the world as presented. The definite article "the" in these NPs forces the reader to focus on the perspective of the protagonist.

TEXT 6

The Nellie, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide. (**Heart of Darkness**,1902 :5)

Heart of Darkness is a [novella](#) written by [Joseph Conrad](#). Before its 1902 publication, it appeared as a three-part series (1899) in [Blackwood's Magazine](#). It is widely regarded as a significant work of English literature and part of the [Western canon](#).

The Nellie is the ship, anchored in the Thames River, on which Marlow tells his tale. Five men--Marlow, the Director of Companies, the Lawyer, and the Accountant, and the narrator--are at rest in the midst of sailing down the Thames River on the Nellie, their small boat. The men are waiting for the turn of tide that will take them downriver. They sit idly and consider playing dominoes but never get started, as the sun sets.

The definite article in "the Nellie" is used to introduce an entity that will be the primary topic of concern in the immediately following discourse. The analysis of high topicality (discourse prominence) is cannot be uniquely identifiable since it is not treated that way by the writer even on subsequent mention. The occurrence of the definite article in the initial mention of "the Nellie" in (6) is crucial in conveying the prominence of this object. The first mention with "the" helps make "the Nellie" the focus of the novella.

Conclusion

This paper has explored definiteness from different perspectives. After outlining four semantic theories to explain definiteness, the paper has shown that no single theory proposed – familiarity, uniqueness, inclusiveness or identifiability can alone account for the full distribution of the definite article in English. In particular, pragmatic notions such as: topic- comment, new – given information, discourse prominence and viewpoint in context contribute crucially to the interpretation of the definite article in literary works.

Definite noun phrases in literary works may be used to refer to entities that have not been mentioned beforehand in the text. One reason to use the definite article especially in the opening sentences of novels or short stories is to encourage readers to empathize with, adopt the viewpoint and presuppose about the main topic of the story. Moreover, with analyzing the texts, current theories might be found to be inadequate to explain referential noun phrases. However, the data presented in this article demonstrate that writers do not simply use definite article in a way, responding chiefly to what they think hearers know. These data suggest that article selection is an aspect of the active, dynamic process of referent construction, in which writers construct discourse referents in such a way as to induce hearers to accept the referents into the discourse under different oppositions.

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