37. Definite Articles

Matthew S. Dryer

1. Defining the values

This map shows information regarding definite articles. For the purposes of this map, a definite article is a morpheme which accompanies nouns and which codes definiteness or specificity, like 'the' in English. This is a somewhat broader use of the term *definite article* than is common, since it includes (i) affixes on nouns that code definiteness; and (ii) demonstratives, if those demonstratives are used as markers of definiteness. In many languages, words that are demonstratives, either in the sense that they can be used deictically with an accompanying gesture or in the sense that they exhibit a distinction in terms of distance (as in the contrast of *this* and *that* in English), are also widely used in contexts where English would use a definite article rather than a demonstrative.

@	1.	Definite word distinct from demonstrative	197
@	2.	Demonstrative word used as marker of definiteness	56
@	3.	Definite affix on noun	84
@	4.	No definite article but indefinite article	41
@	5.	Neither definite nor indefinite article	188
		total	566

The first type shown on the map involves languages in which the **definite article is a separate word that is distinct from demonstrative words** in the language. English is an example of such a language: the definite article *the* is distinct from the demonstratives *this* and *that*. Also illustrating this type is Lakhota (Siouan; north-central United States), as in (1).

(1)   Lakhota (Ingham 2001: 16)

     wic'aṡa   ki   he

man   the   that

'that man'

Not only is the definite article distinct from demonstratives in Lakhota, but it can co-occur with a demonstrative, as in (1). Note that languages vary as to whether the definite article precedes or follows the noun.

There are, broadly speaking, two functions associated with definite articles. One of these is an anaphoric function, to refer back to something mentioned in the preceding discourse. The other is a nonanaphoric function, to refer to something not mentioned in the preceding discourse but whose existence is something that the speaker assumes is known to the hearer. This assumed knowledge may be based on general knowledge (as in *the sun*) or it may be based on inferences that the hearer can make in context (for example, inferring from mention of a house that the house has a door, thus making it possible to use a definite article in referring to the door of the house). In some languages, the morphemes treated here as definite articles appear to be restricted to anaphoric usage in that descriptions

assign them translations like 'previously mentioned'. An example of such a word is found in Mangarrayi (isolate; Northern Territory, Australia); the word is formed by adding a special prefix (*gi-*) to the distal demonstrative stem, as in (2).

(2)   Mangarrayi (Merlan 1982: 44)

    ja-guṛwa-n   *gi-nara*   *Ø-gigmuli*

    3SG.3SG-circle-PRES   DEF-that   M.ACC-boy

    'He goes around the boy.'

Note that in some languages, the definite article is distinct from the demonstrative words but is identical to a third person pronoun. The examples in (3) illustrate this in Loniu (Austronesian; Admiralty Islands, Papua New Guinea); compare the use of the third person singular pronoun *iy* in (3a) with its use as a definite article in (3b), where it is distinct from the demonstrative word that follows the noun.

(3)   Loniu (Hamel 1994: 76, 100)

    a. *iy   kiʔi   la   ɛlɛwɛn*   b. *iy   amat   iyɔ*

3SG PERF go far   the man   this

'He went far.'   'this man'

The second type shown on the map involves languages in which **one of the demonstrative words is frequently used as a marker of definiteness**. In many languages, it is possible to use demonstrative words anaphorically to refer back to something mentioned in the preceding discourse. However, languages differ considerably in the frequency with which demonstratives are used in this way. In some languages, such usage is relatively unusual, in that anaphoric noun phrases other than pronouns usually do not occur with a demonstrative. In other languages, such usage is very common: in some languages, the majority of anaphoric noun phrases occur with a demonstrative. While there is a continuum of cases between these two extremes, a language is counted here as a language using a demonstrative as a definite article if examination of example sentences or texts reveals that the language uses demonstratives anaphorically more than English does. Most of the languages shown on the map as using demonstratives as

definite articles appear to use demonstratives anaphorically considerably more frequently than English. For example, examination of a short text in Ojibwa (Algonquian; Ontario, etc.) in Nichols (1988: 45-47) reveals that of the eleven noun phrases, seven occur with a demonstrative, and two of the remaining four are pragmatically indefinite (an indefinite article is used in the English translation) while two bear possessive affixes ('my car'). Four of the demonstrative occurrences are references to a bear which is one of the two protagonists in the story. When the bear is introduced, it occurs without additional marking (it is one of the two pragmatically indefinite noun phrases referred to above), but all four subsequent references occur with a demonstrative, one of them given in (4), in which the demonstrative *wa* is glossed as 'that'.

(4)   Ojibwa (Nichols 1988: 46)

   "mii maanpii wii-bkeyaanh"   *kido*   *giiwenh*

   but   here   intend-turn.off.1SG   say.3SG   it.is.said

   wa   mko

   that   bear

'"Well, this is where I turn off," the bear said.'

Similarly, the other main protagonist in the text, a man, is mentioned the first time with a verbal expression, but the two subsequent mentions involve a demonstrative. But all of the Ojibwa demonstratives are translated by 'the' in the English translations and the translations would have sounded unnatural if they had been translated with English demonstratives. Definite noun phrases do not always occur with a demonstrative in Ojibwa texts, but they very often do. Descriptions of languages often do not make clear that one of the demonstratives is commonly used for anaphoric reference, so it is likely that some languages shown on the map as lacking definite articles would under closer examination turn out to be languages in which the demonstrative is used as a definite article.

In some languages in which the demonstrative can be used as a definite article, it occurs in a different position within the noun phrase when it is being used as a definite article. For example, in Swahili, the demonstrative follows the noun when used demonstratively but precedes the noun when used as a

definite article. The reverse situation obtains in Ute (Uto-Aztecan; Colorado; Givón (in collaboration with the Southern Ute Tribe) 1980: 288-289), Shambala (Bantu; Tanzania; Besha 1993: 28), and Pa'a (Chadic; Nigeria; Skinner 1979: 61-62). Such languages are all shown on the map as ones in which the demonstrative can be used as a definite article.

The third type shown on the map involves languages in which **the definite marker is an affix on nouns**, as in (5) from Egyptian Arabic.

(5)   Egyptian Arabic (Gary and Gamal-Eldin 1982: 59)

       ʔiṭ-ṭajjaar-a   *gaaja*

       the-plane-F.SG   come

       'The plane is coming.'

In some languages, the definite marker is a clitic which can appear on nouns or on postnominal modifiers, most commonly on the final word in the noun phrase. Such definite clitics are not treated here as definite affixes, but as definite words, falling into

one of the first two types. An example of such a language is Angami (Tibeto-Burman; northeast India), illustrated in (6).

(6)   Angami (Giridhar 1980: 93)

lêsə̂dá   kêvī=ù

book   good=the

'the good book'

It is possible that some of the languages shown as having definite affixes actually have definite clitics instead.

The fourth type shown on the map involves **languages which do not have a definite article but do have an indefinite article**, by the criteria discussed in chapter 38. For example, Tauya (Madang, Trans-New Guinea; Papua New Guinea) has an indefinite article, as in (7a), but no definite article. The indefinite article is not obligatory, however, and a noun phrase without an article may be either definite or indefinite, as illustrated in (7b).

(7)   Tauya (MacDonald 1990: 108, 122)

a. *fanu   ?afa*

    man   INDEF

    'a man'

b. *nen-ni   wate   amo?o=pe   ese-i-?a*

    3PL-ERG   house   new=BEN   want-3PL-IND

    'They want a new house.'

The final type shown on the map involves **languages with neither an indefinite article nor a definite article**. In such languages, noun phrases are generally vague with respect to definiteness, as illustrated in (8) for Cherokee (Iroquoian; North Carolina and Tennessee).

(8)   Cherokee (Scancarelli 1987: 190)

    ki:hli   u:-skala   achu:ca

    dog   3SG-bite.PUNCT   boy

    'The/a dog bit the/a boy.'

A morpheme is treated as a definite article for the purposes of this map if it is more generally a specificity marker,

i.e. if it marks not only definite noun phrases but specific indefinites. This is the case for the "definite" article in Sango (Samarin 1967: 62-63) and Futuna-Aniwa (Dougherty 1983: 21-23); see examples of the latter in chapter 38.

There are a variety of morphosyntactic manifestations of definiteness which are not included as definiteness markers on this map. In some languages, pronominal inflection elsewhere in the clause may depend on the definiteness of the coreferring noun phrase, in that inflection will occur only if the noun phrase in question is intended definitely (though the noun phrase itself will generally not bear any marking for definiteness). For example, Ngiyambaa (Pama-Nyungan; New South Wales, Australia) employs absolutive pronominal clitics in second position in the clause, but the third person clitics are only used if the absolutive noun phrase is intended definitely. Also excluded here are case affixes or adpositions that occur with an object of the verb but only if it is definite, as in Persian (Elwell-Sutton 1941: 24-25). Finally, the map also excludes morphemes in noun phrases which code definiteness but which only occur in the presence of nominal modifiers. For example, the normal way

to code definiteness in Danish is by means of a suffix on the noun, as in (9a); if the noun occurs with an adjective, a separate definite article is used, as in (9b).

(9)   Danish (Allan et al. 1995: 54)

    a.   *mand-en*

       man-the.COMMON.SG

       'the man'

    b.   *den   gamle   mand*

       the   old   man

       'the old man'

Because the word in (9b) is used only when a modifier of the noun occurs, it is excluded here, and Danish is coded according to the structure in (9a), as a language with a definite affix.

2. Geographical distribution

Languages with definite articles which are words distinct from demonstratives are common in Europe, especially western

Europe, in a wide belt across central Africa from west to east (though not in the south), in New Guinea and the Pacific, and in Mesoamerica, as well as being scattered in other areas. They are relatively infrequent in much of Asia, in South America, and in North America except near the west coast.

Languages in which demonstratives are used as definite articles are widely scattered, but are relatively more common in the United States, and are relatively infrequent in the Americas south of the United States and in Europe.

Languages with definite affixes are relatively common in parts of Europe, both in an area stretching from Scandinavia to northern Russia and in a couple of languages in the Balkan area, in the Middle East, among Northwest Caucasian languages, in the same belt across Africa in which definite article words distinct from demonstratives are common, and in western North America.

Languages lacking definite articles are common in most areas of the world, but especially so in Asia and South America. One area in which they are infrequent is western Europe. Languages with an indefinite article but no definite article are

common in an area in Asia stretching from Turkey to the Caucasus and Iran and in New Guinea.

3. Theoretical issues

In English and many other European languages, definite articles are often considered part of a larger category of determiners along with demonstratives and various other words that occur in the same position within noun phrases. In other languages, such a determiner category is less motivated; see chapters 38 and 88 for discussion. See Map 88 on the order of demonstrative and noun.