

Definite ‘The’ and Generic ‘The’ Distinction

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to find out differences between definite ‘the’ and generic ‘the’ from traditional grammar to cognitive grammar concepts in order to help learners certainly understand when they use or analyze ‘the’ for an instance, and overcome the ambiguity.

Keywords: Traditional grammar, cognitive grammar, definite, generic

INTRODUCTION

The main functions of language are to enable people to symbolize their experiences in a perceptible form and to communicate them into others. In expressing their thoughts, speakers constantly need to decide which words and grammatical constructions to use. Both the inventories of words and constructions of a language provide a set of options which the speaker has to choose from in communicating her thoughts. A cognitive approach to grammar is therefore “usage-based”: it looks at the structural choices available and the speaker’s reasons for choosing one alternative over the other. A Cognitive Grammar is based on the following assumptions: (1) the grammar of a language is part of human cognition and interacts with other cognitive faculties, especially with perception, attention, and memory. (2) The grammar of a language presents generalization about phenomena in the world as its speakers’ experience. (3) Forms of grammar are, like lexical items, meaningful and never “empty” or meaningless, and often assumed in purely structural models of grammar. (4) The grammar of a language represents the whole of a native speaker’s knowledge of both the lexical categories and the grammatical structures of her language.

Human thought and its expression in language are intimately interrelated, so this paper seeks to show how cognitive approaches and traditional grammar approaches in the world of concepts and meaning of ‘the’ and grammar of the language ‘the’ are. ‘The’ is considered a distinction between definite reference and generic reference.

Definite Reference

Definite reference is inclusive: a definite referent includes all the elements that form its set, i.e. it does not exclude any of them. For example, in *Can you open the window?* The speaker refers to a window that is the only one of its kind or somehow attracts our attention within a given pragmatic situation, e.g. in a room that only has one window, or that has several windows. In *Can you open the windows?* the speaker refers to all windows which form a set in a given pragmatic situation, the speaker would not be satisfied if the hearer only opens four of the six windows of a room Günter Radden (2007:96), there are three sub-types of definite reference which will be discussed in the following sections: (i) deictic reference, (ii) discourse reference and (iii) unique reference.

Deictic Reference

Referents that are accessible in the environment of the speech situation can be pointed to. This is why this type of situational given reference is described as deictic reference. In deictic reference it is essential that the speaker reveals the deictic centre of the speech situation.

Discourse Reference

In the progress of discourse, mental spaces for new referents are continually opened by means of indefinite referents. Once a space for a referent has been opened in the discourse, it becomes part of the set of referents shared by speaker and hearer. The speaker may therefore refer to them at any time by means of definite reference. This type of reference is dependent on the ongoing discourse and is therefore described as discourse deixis or discourse reference. Two main types of discourse reference are distinguished: anaphoric reference and cataphoric reference.

Unique Reference

A speaker and hearer of the same speech community share knowledge of their immediate environment, their culture, and the world at large. The Speaker starts from the assumption that the hearer she is talking to is familiar with many referents of their shared world knowledge. Consequently she may simply refer to such entities as definite referents even if she has not been introduced before. These referents are “unique” within the shared socio-cultural world knowledge of speaker and hearer, and reference to the hearer is known as unique reference. However, Huong Nguyen Thu (2005:24-48) hypothesizes from Russell (1905), definite needs to be defined and based on some discussions involve the notions of uniqueness versus existentiality and familiarity. Each of these will be dealt with separately below.

Uniqueness and Existentiality

Many philosophers and logicians have engaged into a survey of the meaning of definite. The first, his attempt goes back to Russell (1905), because Russell has the following well-known example:

- i. The King of France is bald.
 - a. This sentence, according to Russell, is a representation of a conjunction of three propositions.
- ii. There is a King of France.
- iii. There is not more than one King of France.
- iv. This individual is bald.

These propositions all share one property: they are all asserted. These propositions clearly follow a logical entailment. That is, if one of them is false, the whole conjunction is false. To assert (1) is to assert the other three propositions. To assert (2) is an existential clause and claims the existence of the object referred to by the definite description. To assert (3) is a uniqueness claim about the object: there is only one individual mentioned. To assert (4) claims the predication is applicable to this unique, existing individual. His arguments based on the view of Russell, the truth and falsity of (1) lies in all these three propositions. If one of them is false, (1) will be false. Thus, (1) would be false if it were uttered at the present time by virtue of the falsity of (2): there is no King of France nowadays. Or if there happened to be more than one King of France, (1) would be false

as a result of the falsity of (3). And if this individual were not bald, (1) would not be true because (4) is false.

Familiarity

Familiarity theories claim that felicitous use of 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).

The first source of familiarity identified by Hawkins typifies situations in which an entity is a member of the “previous discourse set”, that is, where it has already been talked about: “mention of *a professor* permits subsequent reference to *the professor*” Hawkins (1991: 408). Second, an entity may be familiar if it is part of the immediate situation of utterance in which the speaker and hearer find themselves: in “*Pass me the bucket*” will be unambiguous for the hearer if there is just one bucket in his field of vision” Hawkins (1991: 408). Third, knowledge shared by people in the same physical location “larger situation set” say a city or a country may justify the assumption that a referent is familiar: “inhabitants of the same town who have never met before can immediately talk about *the mayor*, meaning the unique *mayor* of their town” Hawkins (1991: 408). Fourth, a very general kind of community knowledge regarding Predictable co-occurrences of entities may supply the grounds for familiarity. “After a previous linguistic mention of a class, the speaker can immediately talk of *the professor*, *the bucket*, *the mayor*. All members of the relevant linguistic community know that the set of things which make up a class typically include these” Hawkins (1991: 409).

However, Hawkins maintains that the definition of familiarity is not accurate if one considers associative cases such as *the author* of a book has been mentioned.

- (5) *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.*

Birner (1993) analyzed, 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. Within current linguistic theory, the familiarity approach was revived by the work of Heim (1982). Like Strawson, Heim argued that definite descriptions are referential. However, she also argued indefinite descriptions are referential as well. Heim took the uses of definite and indefinite descriptions as they occur in (6) as typifying their semantics.

- (6) *Mary saw a movie last week. The movie was not very interesting.*

In the mini discourse in (6), the indefinite NP *a movie* is used to introduce a new entity into the discourse context. Subsequently that entity is referred to with a definite *the movie*. Notice that we might as easily have referred to *the movie* in the second sentence of (6) with a pronoun *it* was not very interesting. Heim grouped pronouns and definite descriptions together as being governed by a familiarity condition: use of a definite is only permitted when the existence of the referred to entity has been established in the particular discourse.

On the other hand in cognitive approaches, definite is constructed in the notion of a mental space Fauconnier (1994). Referring expressions designate things that exist, not in the real world, but things in mental space, that is, a situation as conceived by a language user. Huong Nguyen Thu (2005) analyzed from Langacker (1991) that definite lies on the speech act

participants' awareness of the entity referred to by a nominal (i.e. a noun marked by an article) in the current discourse space. To attain successful communication, the participants should rely on their ability to reach one another's mental space within the discourse space, so there are two prerequisites for establishing definite discourse space and mental contact. The discourse space, which is shared by the speaker and hearer, is made up of those elements and relations construed as a basis for communication at a given moment in the flow of discourse. The discourse space may include:

- a. All or portions of other, previously existing spaces available (e.g. I bought *a flat TV and a DVD recorder*, but I had to return *the DVD recorder*.)
- b. A new space created by the discourse itself (e.g. There was *a beautiful lady* who wanted to see you.)
- c. Present reality or the immediate physical context as the discourse space by default (e.g. Watch out for *the dog* behind you!).

Mental contact concerns an entity being singled out for individual conscious awareness in the conceptualizer's current psychological state. For examples:

(7) John wants to catch *a fish*.

In (7), the hearer can be brought into mental contact with *a fish* even though two readings are available: specific and non-specific. In a non-specific reading, *the fish* exists in the space representing John's desire; whereas, the specific reading suggests only that John should have a

particular *fish* in mind. This does not presume that the speaker or the hearer has knowledge of *the fish*. What is revealed from this reading is that the speech-act participants have no knowledge other than that there is *a fish* in John's mind and that it is *the fish* he wants to catch.

In conclusion, for a referent to be similarity, it is generally agreed that the referent must be unique. The two main theories about the meaning of definiteness are uniqueness and familiarity. However, in cognitive approach, Langacker's notion of mental space, which Huong Nguyen Thu (2005) analyzed, is prerequisite for definite. If a speaker and hearer achieve mental space, then they can uniquely identify an entity.

Let us now consider another aspect of the use of '*the*' in English. That is, generic reference.

GENERIC REFERENCE

Generics are sentences that express generalizations without the use of an explicit quantifier, for example, "dogs have four legs", "a tiger has stripes", "ducks lay eggs" and "the kangaroo hops". Because generic statements provide the means for talking about whole kinds or classes of things, they provide insight into the nature of the conceptual mechanisms available for representing such multiplicities and the distinct ways in which they may be characterized in language and thought Leslie (2007). Like him, Prasada, S., & Dillingham, E. (2006) also stated that generics in English come in three distinct syntactic forms: (1)-(3) below exemplify these three forms:

1. **Tigers** have stripes.
2. **A tiger** has stripes.
3. **The tiger** has stripes.

These three different forms of generics are known as bare plural generics, indefinite

singular generics, and definite singular generics respectively.

Thomas (1989) also agreed that there are three forms of generics, singular indefinite generics, singular definite generics and bare plural generics.

4. (a) **A lion** is a dangerous animal.
- (b) **The lion** is a dangerous animal.
- (c) **Lions** are dangerous animals.

In this paper the author focuses on definite singular generic 'the' uses of English noun phrases and sees how linguists account for its use.

In the history both of philosophy of language and of linguistics, there have been two quite distinct phenomena that have been referred to or classified as generic. The first is reference to a kind-a genus-as exemplified in (5). The underlined noun phrases in (5) do not denote or designate some particular *potato or group of potatoes*, but rather the *kind of potato itself*. In this usage a generic noun phrase is a noun phrase that does not refer to an ordinary individual or object, but instead refers to a kind, Krifka (1995).

5. (a) The potato was first cultivated in South America.
- (b) The Irish economy became independent upon the potato.

He calls noun phrase likes *the potato* in these sentences *kind-referring* noun phrase, and expresses a kind of general property or set of kind.

In short, definite singular generic (in English denote primitive taxonomic entities kinds is in the domain of reference.

In cognitive grammar, according to Huong Nguyen Thu (2005) hypothesized from Langacker (1991), generic 'the' used with a singular noun looked like the structure as denoting a *type* (i.e. genus or kind) construed as a unique *instance* (i.e. entity or set member) through the notion of a *type hierarchy*. For example, my cat *Tommy* belongs to the species *cat*, but at the same time, it can be considered a [+mammal], an [+animal] or a [+thing].

In (3) gives a schematic illustration of generic reference in *the tiger has stripes*, where *the tiger* is a generic referent. The definite singular refers to a single instance, which is class as such. *The tiger has stripes*. With animals, the class is species, which is implicitly contrasted to other species within the animal kingdom. The notion species mainly applies to categories in biological classification, especially to kinds of animals and plants, but may also involve physical objects, especially artifact. In *the computer has changed our lives*, we are thinking of *the computer* which has replaced the typewriter, enable worldwide communication and eliminated many traditional office jobs. Biological speaking, group of humans are a species, too. *The husband is the head of the family*.

On the other hand, Huong Nguyen Thu (2005) also referred to generic human groups which may also be express in English by nominalized adjectives which describe a salient property. In English, these nominalized adjectives always refer to a class, never to a singular entity as in following sentences.

6. (a) **The old** are still running the country.
- (b) **The young** will take over soon.

The nominalized adjectives describe a property that defines a class, at the same time, focus on its individuals by taking plural agreement. For obvious reasons only characteristic and

stable properties qualify for defining a class. Thus we have generic adjectives such as *the blind, the rich, the poor, the hungry*, etc., but not *the happy, the new or the thirsty*.

In sum up, definite singular generic in cognitive grammar defined a type or class.

DEFINITE ‘THE’ AND GENERIC ‘THE’ DISTINCTION

As several authors, including Ojeda (1991) and Strawson (1950), note that the noun can sometimes encode a generic statement about nouns. Consider the following (derived from examples in Strawson (1950) and Ojeda (1991)).

7. **The whale** is a mammal.
(definite singular generic)
8. (a) Babbage invented **the computer**.
(definite singular generic)
(b) Babbage repaired **the computer**.
(definite only)

On the most likely reading, what is asserted in (7) clearly has nothing to do with any *specific whale*, but is rather about a property associated with *whale-hood*. In (8), one on which a *specific computer* at hand was invented by Babbage, and one on which the invention of computers in general is to be attributed to Babbage whereas (8b) seems only to have a reading analogous to the first of these. Citing examples like (8a), where ‘*the*’ appears to be able to take distinct generic and descriptive readings. Ojeda (1991) concludes that there are two fundamentally distinct meanings of ‘*the*’ (in essence, that ‘*the*’ is lexically ambiguous). He agreed that a definite noun phrase may be taken either as a definite description or as a definite generic.

9. (a) **The dodo** is dead.
(b) **The dodo** is extinct.

He noticed that the ambiguity between definite descriptions and definite generics can be resolved in certain contexts. Thus, the definite noun phrase *the dodo* is taken only as a definite description in (9a), a statement about an individual dodo; it is taken only as a definite generic in (9b), a statement about dodos in general.

Another approach to sentences like (8a) might be to say that sometimes the most *salient computer* is not any individual physical computer but rather the kind of computers. On this view, there would be no lexical ambiguity for *the*, and pragmatic principles would be invoked to account for the contrast between (8a) and (8b). In fact, the meaning of (8a) and (8b) depends not only the linguistic knowledge *the computer* of the speaker and hearer, but also in the context of the utterance, knowledge about the status of those involved, *invented the computer* and *repaired the computer* the inferred intent of the speaker, so they are able to overcome apparent ambiguity.

Also, a Truth Value Judgment Task in a form of true (T) or false (F) in the context of the story will clarify differences between definite ‘*the*’ and generic ‘*the*’.

Example: we observed a situation below:

“In our zoo, we have two very unusual tigers. Most tigers eat meat all the time. But our two tigers are vegetarian: they love to eat carrots, and they hate meat.”

Possible target sentences:

- a. *The tigers* like carrots. (definite) T
- b. *The tiger* likes meat. (generic) T
- c. *The tigers* like meat. (definite) F

The tigers in (a) and (c) refer to two tigers in the context, they like carrots and dislike meat, but the tiger in (b) refers to the whole class of tigers.

CONCLUSION

The author will restate in a more condensed forms the central issues discussed in this paper. The paper contributes to clarify the meaning aspects of ‘*the*’ in both traditional and cognitive grammar. It helps learners overcome the ambiguity in using and analyzing ‘*the*’ based on many similar views on definite ‘*the*’ and generic ‘*the*’. Non-alike traditional grammar, cognitive grammar can help students easily differentiates the two notions generic and definite based on the mental space. When a speaker and hearer achieve mental space, they can uniquely identify an entity.

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