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# A Generative Approach to Understanding Definiteness in Determiner Phrases (DP)

**Olugbenga K. Opaleye, Osidare B. Ashiru &  Olusola Adetutu**
D S Adegbenro ICT Polytechnic
Itori, Ogun State, Nigeria
ide adeyinka <jideyink2002@yahoo.com

## ABSTRACT

Determiner phrases (DP) are structures headed by determiners and modified by other elements, mostly nominal. This brings to fore the importance of highlighting the factors that determine the level of definiteness of a DP in referring to referents. These factors may easily be mistaken to include only the lexical qualities of nominals but this is only correct in an NP-analysis. In the generative DP-analysis approach taken in this paper, other factors beyond lexical qualities are considered. The paper discovered that not only the lexical qualities of determiners but also quantification; the contextual influence of bare plurals and indefinite pronouns; and referent qualities affect the definiteness of DPs. The contextual influence of bare plurals and indefinite plurals lends some credence to an NP-analysis but an analysis of definiteness is no doubt better favoured through a look from the angle of the determiner (through DPs in a DP-analysis) than from that of the nominal (through NPs in an NP-analysis).

**Keywords**: definiteness, DP-analysis, determiner, determiner phrase (DP), referent, quantifier, lexicals

## 1. BACKGROUND

A determiner phrase (DP) could be definite or indefinite in the representation of its referent. To do this, the DP has various resources – lexical and grammatical – within its reach. These numerous resources give way to an indeed complex system of definiteness. This essay looks at this system, and how it works and is described in the grammar. It looks at why and how the content of the DP's specifier (specDP) could not be the sole factor that shows definiteness. It shows how quantification, determiners and lexical properties depict definiteness and indefiniteness in the grammar.

## 2. CORE ISSUES

### 2.1The Number Category in a DP Environment

Features in grammar are called grammatical categories. These classify elements in a language into classes within its grammar – in this case, English's. Such categories include tense which is grouped into present and past. The number category is realised as plural and singular. Lastly, the gender category is realised as masculine, feminine and neuter (Smith, Teschner and Evans, 1994). Frequently, grammatical categories are mistaken for lexical categories which are similar to word classes like nouns, verbs and adjectives. Categories may be brought about and referred to according to the meanings they portray. For example, the category of tense usually indicates the time when activities take place. It tells, for example, if a certain action occurs in present time (now) or it occurred in past time (a time before now). This may be reflected in and structured into words by the use of inflection.

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In English, nouns are naturally uninflected in their base forms. This is if the noun is singular. For words that are plural, the suffix-s, -es or -ies is added. This is not the case with all plurals, because some nouns have irregular plurals. Also, the tense category may not be marked on the item to which it pertains. In this case, the tense category, like the number category, is shown only through other features of the sentence. Here, both categories are indicated through concord (subject-verb agreement) in grammar.

The regular case for number is illustrated with (1) and (2) below.

> (1)     The boy can run (singular)
> (2)     The boys can run (plural)

In the above, number is shown openly with the suffixation (with –s) of boy.

Number may not be marked on the noun itself, if the noun is not inflected as in the regular pattern. Instead the categories are shown in the agreement between the noun and the verb, as in (3) and (4).
> (3)  The sheep is injured (sing.)
> (4)  The sheep are injured (plu.)

In this case, the irregular noun, sheep is not inflected according to regular patterns. In other cases, the number can be reflected both in the noun and also by the agreement of the verb (Smith, Teschner & Evans, 1994). At this point, it should be pointed out that while both reflections (that is, inflection and subject-verb agreement) can be present, they must agree and cannot occur independently of each other, as in (5).
> (5) The boy are running*

However, the selection of number would become unclear and considerably ambiguous if the sentence, which has an irregular noun as subject is in isolation of a larger text that may specify context, as in (6).
> (6)     The sheep can jump

Categories also occur in constituents larger than the word; that is, phrases or at times, clauses. A phrase always takes category value from the lexical word that is either its head or that of another phrase within it. This explains why the DP selects its category (number and gender) based on that of the nominal head (which is lexical, as opposed to grammatical) of the noun phrase (NP) within it. For example, in (2) above, the NP the boys takes its plural number from the noun, boys. Its gender (masculine) is also taken from the nominal head.

In the case of irregular nominal heads such as sheep in (6) above, the number category is only related to the way in which the phrase is formed (Smith, Teschner & Evans, 1994). An example of this is in the coordinated DP George ad Clooney. The phrase has a plural number and will as well take a plural verb. This is always the case even if both nouns from which the phrase is constructed are respectively singular. This is more lexical than grammatical. Grammatically, what represent definiteness are elements like determination and quantification. Determiners are a class of words, phrases or affixes used to provide more extra-textual and referential details of a noun. They function in a DP to identify or distinguish the referent in a particular context without modifying it (Teschner & Evans, 2000). They may signal whether the noun definitely or indefinitely refers to members of a class; a far or near object; an element which belongs to a particular individual or thing; or a specific number or quantity of a larger entity.  This function of determiners is often made practical with a number of words that are specifically determiners but, from the traditional perspective, it may contain other elements such as genitive pronouns, e.g. every as in the indefinite phrase every stone.

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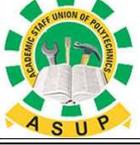
Traditionally, determiners include articles (definite the and indefinite a and an); demonstratives (singular this and that, and plural these and those); ordinals (first, second, third, et c.); definite numerals (one, two, three, et c.) and indefinite numerals (most, any, each, et c.).

Therefore, definiteness in DPs refers to its ability to be identified with its referent by the addressed listener/reader. Definite DPs are direct to certain entities which the addressed individual is in a state to point out (Teschner and Evans, 2000), as illustrated by the subjects and the objects of (7) and (8).

    (7)      The girl took her book
    (8)      The mechanic found his spanner

The addressed listener/speaker is left to determine whose book and whose spanner were both taken and found respectively in (7) and (8) based on the context established in the discourse by each subject.
DPs also introduce new entities into the discourse which the addressed individual is not in a position of identifying. This is the indefinite instance, as in (9) and (10).

    (9) A girl took a book
    (10) A mechanic found a spanner

In the case of (9) and (10), factors such as the context established through other surrounding clauses – usually the subsequent ones – help the addressed listener/reader identify who the subjects and objects respectively refer to.
Furthermore, determiners are traditionally divided into three types, based on the structural positions they naturally take in relation to the nominal they determine. In other words, a determiner may be placed distantly before, closely before or immediately after the nominal it determines. These are:

    (a)      pre-determiners: all, half, both, and multipliers like double, thrice, once and twice;
    (b)      central determiners/determiners-proper: articles, demonstratives and possessives which include his, a, an, this, those, her, and whose; and
    (c)      post-determiners: (i) ordinal numerals and semi determiners which include later, some, next, other and last; and(ii)   cardinal numerals and quantifiers which include some, a lot of and enough.

## 2.2 Quantifiers
Quantifiers are a class of words which can be used in place of determiners. They are controversially determiners too. Quantifiers are used when the language user is required to provide additional information about the number of referents.

They tell how much or how many, as the italicised elements in (11) to (13) do.

    (11)      Most children start school at the age of five
    (12)      We ate some bread and butter
    (13)      We saw lots of birds

Some quantifiers can be used with both count and non-count nouns. These include all, any, enough, more, most, less, a lot of, lots of and some. More derivative than lexical examples are plenty of, heaps of, a load of, loads of. Some quantifiers may be used only with count nouns. For example, each, either, several, a few, fewer, neither and derivative a couple of, hundreds of and thousands of. Other quantifiers may be used only with non-count nouns. These include a little, not much, a bit of. They can be used for semi-abstract entities such as time, money, et c. Others include a great deal of, a good deal of.

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Mallén (1992) points out that a noun can only have a quantifier after it, if it refers to members of a group in general, as in (14) to (16).This is why they are at all called quantifiers because they specify certain quantities within larger quantities.

(14) Few snakes are dangerous
(15) Both cousins work with their mothers-in-law
(16) James never has enough money on weekends

A DP that refers to a specific group of referents in total would naturally use of the, as in (17) and (18) because as already stated in this paper, the is definite (see section **2.1** above).

(17)      All of the children live at home
(18)      He has spent all of the money.

## 2.3 Lexicals

Lexicals are the set of words in a phrase that carry meaning and have (the ability to have) synonyms and antonyms. These words also have the ability to be the heads of phrases. The main lexical categories are noun, verb, adjective, adverb, and preposition (Willis and Willis, 2002).

Syntactically, the categories can be defined according to what they (can) combine with as below.
HYPOTHESIS 1:  Plate, which refers to a thing, is a noun iff it combines well with the article the.
HYPOTHESIS 2:  All nouns – provided they refer to things – combine well with the article the.

This would, for instance, mean that plate, kitchen, table, action and book are nouns, since they: (i) refer to things; and (ii) combine well with the. However, there are times when certain nouns that satisfy these criteria such as action can be used like verbs (not syntactically but pragmatically) in a sentence as illustrated by (19) and (20).

(19)      The action by the leaders improved their lives.
(20)      The action portrayed a positive side of him.

These elements are nevertheless seen as nouns.

Thus, in (19) and (20), action is preceded by the article the and at the same time, followed by a preposition phrase (PP) starting with a preposition (Mallén, 1992). This is characteristic of a DP, despite the fact that action is subconsciously perceived like move. The table below shows a distinction between the features and functions of lexical and grammatical categories respectively.

**Table 1: The distinction between the features and functions of lexical and grammatical categories respectively.**

| Lexical Categories | Grammatical Categories |
|---|---|
| (a) They have purely semantic content. | (a) They have purely functional content. |
| (b) They can undergo derivation. | (b) They typically do not undergo derivation. |
| (c) They are a "open" class. | (c) They are a "closed" class. |
| (d) They are typically constituent heads. | (d) They are introducers of  (lexical) heads. |

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## 3. ANALYSIS OF DATA

### 3.1 Brief Syntax of Definite and Indefinite Determiner Phrases (DP)

Since syntax is the way in which words are combined, as guided by rules, to form larger constituents like phrases and sentences; the syntax of DPs will address how both definite and indefinite DPs are formed from its least node. It indicates specifically what occupies SpecDP, Head and Modifier positions in the DP structure, all of which may or may not influence the definite reference of the entire structure.
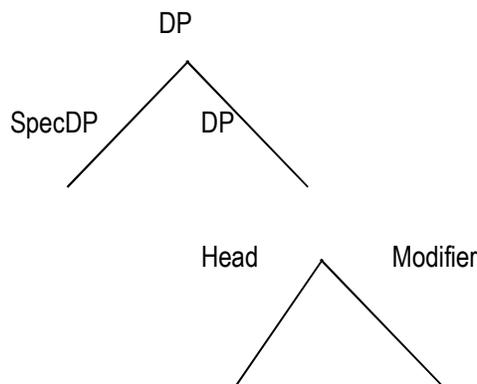


First, in a DP, at least one determiner functions as the head of the phrase, as in (21), where the is Head and plate is the Modf. The same applies to (22), where a is Head and fruit is Modf.

> (21)    $[_{DP} [_{D}$ the $[_{NP}$ plate $]]]$
> (22)    $[_{DP} [_{D}$ a $[_{NP}$ fruit $]]]$

Secondly, some DPs may consist of two determiners, as in (23) and (24).

> (23)    all seven doctors  (Quantifier + Numeral)
> (24)     all the boys  (Quantifier+ Article)

The third form is the one consisting of a determiner and a PP (MacLaughlin, 1997), as in (25) and (26).

> (25) most of the scholars (Quantifier + PP)
> (26) one of the following (Numeral+ PP)

Fourth, they can be formed by three determiners as below.

> (27) all his few neighbors (Quantifier +  Possessive Determiner + Quantifier)
> (28) all those many problems (Quantifier + Demonstrative Determiner + Quantifier)

The last form is that consisting of a determiner and a PP which includes other determiners and quantifiers.

> (29) all of her many accessories (Quantifier + PP [preposition + possessive determiner +  Quantifier + Noun)

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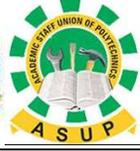
### 3.2 The Quality of Bare Plurals as Opposed to Singular DPs

Bare plurals are the nouns that have plural number (that is, refer to more than one referent) without the aid of an overt determiner, such balls, gums, chargers, et c. Bare plurals can have a general interpretation, while this is not the case that occurs with singular definite DPs. Smith (2005) calls this general interpretation "generic." Sentences (30) to (32) have subjects with this kind of generic interpretation.

- (30)    Dogs are disturbing
- (31)    Human beings exist by birth
- (32)    Plants breathe

While (30) may only have a generic interpretation in particular contexts, (31) and (32) always do. Interestingly, the generic interpretation also occurs even in DPs with overt D, as in (33). In other words, overt D the in the structure does not make the reference specific to a particular cheetah, which makes it agnate with cheetahs are fast.

- (33)    The Cheetah is fast

They can also have an existential interpretation as shown in these examples (34) to (36). In other words, the DP brings into existence through the clause, a new specific entity, as in the subjects of the following.

- (34)    Dogs chased the thief
- (35)    The plant is poisonous
- (36)    The cheetah is lame

The implication of and deduction from these example pairs is that singular the-DPs may occur existentially or generically, and that bare plurals possess less definiteness compared to singular definite DPs.

### 3.3 The Use of Indefinite Pronouns

Pronouns stand for a noun – an individual or individuals, a thing or things – whose identity is made clear in the text. They cannot ordinarily be preceded by a determiner and rarely take an attributive adjective, especially in literal, formal use (Li, 1998). Their examples include you, him, who, me, my, each and one another.

The fact that pronouns don't admit determiners is the core feature that differentiates them from nouns. A determiner can always limit the meaning of the noun in a number of ways but the pronoun does not permit this (ibid.). While the determiner defines the meaning of the noun when they co-occur in a DP, the pronoun takes the place of the DP in its entirety. (37) illustrates this by substituting the boy with he.

- (37)    [[ The boy ] [[ is ] [ here ]]]
- (38)    [[ He ] [[ is ] [ here ]]]

Pronouns are traditionally grouped into seven sub-categories, but for the purpose of this study, only indefinite pronouns are discussed. Probably the most distinguishing feature of indefinite pronouns is that they do not come in place of specific nouns but function themselves as nouns. This is the main reason behind why they are known to play a great role when dealing with definiteness in DPs. Examples of indefinite pronouns in English are everybody, anybody, somebody, all, each, every, and some, none and one.

One of the main difficulties encountered when it comes to indefinite pronouns is the fact that some of them such as everybody may be mistaken to grammatically take plural verbs because they refer to more than one person. However, it should be pointed out that other indefinite pronouns can be either singular or plural.

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This depends on the situation that it comes with at the time. None, for instance, is almost always plural; that is, "not any," except when something else makes it singular; that is, "not one" (Dykstra, 2005) as illustrated by (39).

(39)     None of the food is fresh

Some can be singular or plural depending on whether it refers to something countable or non-countable.
In grammar, there are some other possibly derivative indefinite pronouns – that is, they are words that almost only occur as determiners but also sometimes function as indefinite pronouns. Examples are: enough, few, fewer, less, little, many, much, et c., as illustrated below.

(40)     Few will be chosen; fewer will finish
(41)     Little is expected
(42)     More parents have come; many are yet to come
(43)     All is well

### 3.4 Generic and Specific Referent Qualities in DP

Referent qualities are the characteristics possessed by the experiential entities being referred to in a structure. Generic referent qualities (in DPs) therefore are those qualities which are generalised across referents and entities due to stereotyping, culture or nature; while specific referent qualities (in DPs), on the other hand, are those which are specific to a particular entity and time, and may not occur in a whole group (Bridel, 1797). In this case, generic qualities in DPs are indefinite; while specific qualities are definite.

(44)     The leopard has four legs
(45)     The vehicle has an engine
(46)     The tree has roots

In (44), what is referred to is not a particular but all leopards. In the above example, it is generalised. But when one says the leopard has killed an antelope, they refer to a particular antelope which has been killed by a specific leopard. In (45) also, what is referred to is not a particular vehicle but all vehicles; but when one says the vehicle has been involved in an accident,  they refer to a particular vehicle which has had an accident. This also applies to (46). Specific qualities therefore play a major role in the definiteness of a determiner as compared to generic qualities.

### 4. CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, conclusion can be generally made that the feature of definiteness is, according to Lyons (1999, 1), "not limited to noun phrases introduced by the or a" but extends to and through even lexical qualities. This essay proves:

(a)     That while the morphological structure of a noun may have a great role to play in its selection of number, it does function independently of the selection of number of the following verb (which, this means, it must grammatically agree with) (cf. section **2.1**).

(b)     That quantifiers, which ordinarily possess a grammatical selection of number, may or may not have an exclusive selection. In some cases, their selection of number may depend on context and situation, and this may make their parent constituent seem grammatically unacceptable when considered independently of the relevant situation (cf. section **2.2**).

(c)     That generalisations cannot satisfactorily be made about the function of DPs based on their patterns of selection, and constituent structure (cf. section **2.3**).

(d)     That singular the-DPs occur existentially or generically based on the context of situation (cf. section **3.2**).

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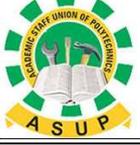
(e)     That bare plurals possess less definiteness than their singular the-DP counterparts (cf. section **3.2**).

(f)     That even though indefinite pronouns may seem to appear as having a fixed selection of number, certain situations may alter this, as in the case of none (cf. Dykstra, 2005).

(g)     That generic referent qualities – term defined above – in DPs are indefinite, while specific qualities are generally definite (cf. section **3.4**)

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