Vietnamese learners mastering English articles
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Chapter 3
THE MEANING OF ARTICLES

Chapter 2 has made clear that Vietnamese learners of English have relatively more problems with English articles than with any other grammar area. As this dissertation aims to help students improve in this area, we will try to find out where exactly the problem lies for these students. In Chapter 5, we will perform an error analysis, but before we can do so, we have to understand the English article system so that we can categorize article errors into different types. The purpose of this chapter is therefore to explore the meanings of English articles. Because the explanations of meanings of English articles depend heavily on theoretical insights, we shall first give a brief overview of the main insights in different research traditions.

In describing articles, theorists have generally agreed that English articles are prototypical realizations of marking definiteness (Halliday, 1976; Chesterman, 1991; Lyons, 1999). They are used with noun phrases to denote that something (whether in the real world or not) is definite or not. That is, an entity referred to by a noun phrase cannot be known as definite or non-definite without the occurrence of an article. It is therefore crucial to understand the notion of “definiteness”.

Below a brief overview is given of the notion of definiteness, starting from more formal, “objectivist” approaches, which do not take the role of a speaker (conceptualizer) into account, via descriptivist and pragmatic views and ending with a “subjectivist” account, which takes into account the role of the conceptualizer and the given context in construing a situation and portraying it for expressive purposes (Langacker, 1991b). In our view a subjective account is the most useful in explaining the article
system to L2 learners of English in that it seems to explain native intuitions about article use in a simple to understand framework.

DEFINING DEFINITENESS

The main notion associated with articles is definiteness. Intuitively, the concept of definiteness is quite simple. A thing in the real world denoted by a noun, which is also called a referent, is definite when it is known, familiar, unique, or identified to the speaker and hearer. The referent is indefinite when it is novel, unfamiliar, or assumed not to be identified by the hearer. Theoretically, however, definiteness is a complicated issue. Being a covert category, the notion of definiteness becomes overt only through the co-occurrence of a definite article (i.e. the) or an indefinite article (i.e. a, unstressed some, and zero) with a noun. Three levels of complexity are frequently discussed. The first level is centered on the meaning of definiteness, i.e. what does it mean to say that something is definite. The second level is concerned with the intersection between definiteness and specificity, in which the factor of reference is taken into account. Several possibilities are yielded as a result of the combination between definiteness and specificity.

a. specific + definite: I’m going to clean the house tomorrow.
b. nonspecific + definite: I’m going to interview the first person who wins this contest.
c. specific + indefinite: I met a survivor from the Asian tsunami yesterday.
d. nonspecific + indefinite: I dream of buying a luxury house.

The third level of intricacy is found when definiteness intersects with genericity, in which the notion of a set rather than a specific member of a set is the focus. Hence, we may have definite generic or indefinite generic.
Generic + definite: *The house* is the largest purchase you will make in your lifetime.
Generic + indefinite: *Houses* are expensive. / *A house* is expensive.

These three levels of complexity of definiteness will be explored in this section. The first part of the section is concerned with the notions that have been used to define definiteness (e.g. uniqueness, identifiability, etc.) and the relation between definiteness and specificity, for the nature of definiteness, taken from a pragmatic position, cannot be detached from reference, an aspect of specificity. The second part is concerned with genericity of the articles. In these two parts, some research traditions will be presented alongside to provide some insights into the notions introduced.

**Notions used to define definiteness**

The literature abounds with discussion on how definiteness needs to be defined. Some of the most recurring discussions involve the notions of uniqueness versus existentiality, familiarity, identifiability versus locatability, and inclusiveness. 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 definiteness. The first attempt goes back to Russell. Russell (1905), by restricting himself to singular count-nouns, discusses the opposition between the definite article and the indefinite article through the following well-known example:

\[(1) \quad \textit{The King of France} \text{ is bald.}\]

This sentence, according to Russell, is a representation of a conjunction of three propositions.
(2) There is a King of France.
(3) There is not more than one King of France.
(4) This individual is bald.

These three 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. (2) is an existential clause and claims the existence of the object referred to by the definite description. (3) is a uniqueness claim about the object: there is only one individual mentioned. And (4) claims that the predication is applicable to this unique, existing individual. According to 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.

For various logical reasons and arguments that we will not pursue in this context, Russell’s contribution to the understanding of the nature of definiteness is in the first two propositions — existentiality and uniqueness. An entity denoted by a singular noun used with the must exist and must be unique. An entity referred to by a noun marked by a, by contrast, is not unique, though it may exist. Because existentiality can be found in both definite and indefinite descriptions, uniqueness is generally agreed to characterize definiteness. Russell focuses on logical aspects when introducing the notion of uniqueness, but also from a pragmatic perspective, uniqueness can explain the use of the-marked nouns in linguistic contexts and non-linguistic contexts as the following examples illustrate.
I met an old man and a young boy in a park yesterday. Although the old man did not recognize me, I realized he was my friend’s father.

I took a taxi to the airport, but the driver was new to the area. So I missed the flight.

Just give the shelf a quick wipe, will you, before I put the television on it.

Put these clean towels in the bathroom please.

I hear the prime minister was poisoned today.

The moon was very bright last night.

Linguistic contexts are found in (5) and (6). In (5) the referent denoted by the old man is unique because a mention of the man is made in the previous clause. In (6), the driver is used as a result of the unique relationship between a taxi and a driver. That is, a taxi has a driver. In non-linguistic contexts, we also find that we explain the use of the with the notion of uniqueness. The shelf in (7) and the bathroom in (8) are unique in the immediate situation. And the prime minister in (9) and the moon in (10) are unique on account of the larger situation (i.e. a country and the earth).

Uniqueness can also explain the use of the definite article in logical expressions (e.g. superlatives, first, same, only, next, last) or in hypothetical or counterfactual cases (Lyons, 1999)².

She is *a / the best performer I have ever known.

He is *an / the only male student in this class.

She is *a / the first/next/last person in the list.

The winner of this competition will get a free ticket to Vietnam.

In (11-13) the meaning conveyed by the modifying expressions reveals uniqueness; as a result, the indefinite article is incompatible. Similarly, in (14) there is a unique winner who will be able to satisfy the description even

² The contexts that create counterfactual or hypothetical cases in a sentence involve (1) verbs of “propositional attitude” (e.g. wonder, look for, try, hope, intend, etc.), (2) negation, (3) questions, (4) conditionals, (5) modals, (6) future tense (Lyons 1999: 166).
though it is a hypothetical situation in which the competition is not finished yet.

However, some criticisms have been leveled against Russell’s accounts. The first is concerned with logical and pragmatic aspects of meaning. Strawson (1971), who revives Frege (1892), criticizes Russell for putting the three propositions (2-4) on an equal basis. He insists that the existential clause in (2) and the uniqueness clause (3) are not asserted by (1). Only the predication of baldness (3) is asserted by (1). To him, (2) and (3) are only presuppositions or preconditions of (1). If (2) is false, (1) still makes sense although it lacks a truth value as a result of the fact that the definite description (i.e. in 1) fails to refer. In addition, Strawson rejects Russell’s uniqueness implication by maintaining that uniqueness is not restricted to singular definites. The referent of singular indefinites can be as unique as of singular definites. The following example will illustrate the case.

(20) Linh sang well and won a prize – the only prize of the variety contest this year.

In this context, the referent a prize in (15) can be interpreted as there having been only one vocal prize. Therefore, since existentially is a trait that both singular definites and indefinites share, Strawson sees identifiability rather than uniqueness as the essence of definiteness. According to him, the elements of contexts and the role of the hearer should be included when describing the nature of definiteness. We will return to this notion of identifiability later.

The second criticism was concerned with what Hawkins (1978) calls ‘incompleteness.’ To Hawkins (1978), plural and mass nouns can take a definite article under the same conditions as singular unique nouns. The keys in where are the keys should refer to all of the keys in question. Or the sand
in *Move the sand from the front-yard into the barn* is understood as referring to all the sand in question. The totality of the mass or the number of things referred to can be understood as being unique too. This is what Hawkins labels *inclusiveness*. We will get back to the notion of inclusiveness after dealing with familiarity and identifiability.

**Familiarity**

As mentioned earlier, uniqueness can be a constitutive element of definiteness. However, because an analysis in which meaning is divorced from pragmatic elements is felt to be inadequate, attempts have been made to define the meaning of definiteness in terms of reference. Also, because the role of speaker and hearer and the context should be taken into account in explaining the meaning of definiteness (Strawson, 1971), some grammarians consider familiarity to be also a constitutive element of definiteness.

The idea of familiarity can be traced back to Apollonius Dyscolus (2nd century AD), who perceives the role of identity as well as the previous mention of the referent as factors that determine presence and absence of the definite article in Greek (Householder 1981, quoted in Lyons 1999: 254). Christophersen (1939) has developed this view more fully as becomes clear from the following description with respect to the use of *the*:

…for the use of a the-form it is necessary that the thing meant should occupy so prominent a place in the listener’s mind that by the mention of the form the right idea is called up. There must be a basis of understanding and the purpose of the article the is to refer to this basis, to indicate “the thing you know.” This function may be described as “familiarization.” (69-70)

His description suggests that a noun phrase used with *the* indicates that the referent is familiar to both the hearer and the speaker. If nothing has been
filled in the hearer’s mind, a what-question may be anticipated from the hearer as in (16).

(16) A: “I was down at the bookseller’s yesterday, but I couldn’t get the book. It is out of print.”
   B: (surprised) “What book?”
   A: “Oh, didn’t I tell you?...”

The what-question in (16) can be asked because the hearer is not familiar with the book introduced by the speaker. Unfamiliarity arises as a result of the lack of a basis for understanding—‘the thing you know.’ To remedy this situation, a book as in I was down at the bookseller’s yesterday, but I couldn’t get a book should have been used instead, suggesting that the speaker may be aware of what is being referred to but the hearer probably not. As Christophersen (1939: 28) asserts, if the speaker “wants to be understood it is important that he should not use words and phrases which the hearer is likely to misinterpret.” Hence, familiarity can explain the difference between the definite article and the indefinite article with regards to definiteness.

However, Christophersen’s concept of familiarity as an explanation for the definite-indefinite distinction has also been subject to criticism. Hawkins (1978) maintains that the definition of familiarity is not accurate if one considers associative cases such as the author after a book has been mentioned. Christophersen acknowledges this weakness as follows:

Now, in all strictness, this term [familiarity] is not always quite correct. Though the previously acquired knowledge may relate to the very individual meant, yet it is often only indirectly that one is familiar with what is denoted by the word. It may be something else that one is familiar with, but between this ‘something’ and the thing denoted there must be an unambiguous relation. Talking of a certain book, it is perfectly correct to say “The author is unknown” (Christophersen 1939: 72-73).

To Hawkins, the use of the author is unknown cannot bring up in the hearer’s mind the right individual that the speaker is thinking of. Moreover,
Hawkins (1978) maintains that ‘unfamiliarity’ in some cases is compatible with the use of *the*. Here are some examples.

(17) They’ve just got in from Ho Chi Minh City. **The plane** was five hours late.
(18) **The student** Jim went out with last night was nasty to him.
(19) Holland has been buzzing with **the rumor** that the Prime Minister is going to resign.
(20) My supervisor and I share **the same secrets**.

In (17) getting from Ho Chi Minh City to Groningen does not necessarily involve flying. The association can be real in the example, but we cannot really say that the plane was known to the hearer before the second sentence of this example was uttered. In (18-20), the noun phrases accompanied by **the** are perfectly appropriate as first-mention definite descriptions. **The student, the rumor and the secrets** were not mentioned previously. Besides, there are no associative links between the referents of the boldface NPs with those of certain preceding NPs. No prior knowledge is required for the hearer in these cases.

Perridon (1989: 111) states that the weakness of the familiarity theory shows in indefinite NPs. He provides the following example.

(7) You have a fine daughter.

The hearer in (21) should have good knowledge of the entity mentioned since it is his daughter. However, the speaker still uses *a* and not *the*. This challenges the term *familiarity*. For it is clear that a noun phrase marked by *a* can denote an entity which is familiar too. As a result of these inadequacies, the notion of *identifiability* has been suggested as a feature of definiteness.
Identifiability and Locatability

Identifiability is considered to be a feature of definiteness when reference as a speech act is taken into account. Linguists who are influenced by Strawson, Searle, and Grice have come up with this concept, which is considered to be a redefinition of the concept of uniqueness and familiarity. Searle (1969) proposes a principle of identification, which defines the necessary conditions for a successful definite reference as follows:

“[The principle of identification] requires that the hearer be able to identify the object from the speaker’s utterance of the expression. By “identify” here I mean that there should no longer be any doubt or ambiguity about what exactly is being talked about. At the lowest level, questions like “who?”, “what?”, or “which one?” are answered.

Of course at another level these questions are still open: after something has been identified one may still ask “what?” in the sense of “tell me more about it”, but one cannot ask “what?” in the sense of “I don’t know what you are talking about”. Identifying, as I am using the term, just means answering that question. …Identification… rests squarely on the speaker’s ability to supply an expression of one of these kinds, which is satisfied uniquely by the object to which he intends to refer.” (pp. 85-86)

Although Searle is concerned with the necessary conditions for the successful performance of a definite reference under speech act circumstances, his definition of identification may contribute to the notion of identifiability. To Lyons (1999), identifiability involves the hearer’s readiness in identifying the referent of the noun phrase signaled by the. And familiarity is not totally rejected. It is still a component of identifiability. You can identify some real-world entity, which you know to exist because you can see it or have heard of it. Examples (5), (6), and (7) apply to this case. However, identifiability requires more than that. It suggests that the hearer should exert some effort in working out which is referred to. Lyons provides the following illustration concerning (7), which is repeated here for easy reference.
(7) Just give the shelf a quick wipe, will you, before I put the television on it.

In (7), the setting is in the sitting room. Now, for example, Ann wants to drive some nails into the wall to put up a picture while she is on a stepladder, and at that time Joe has entered the room. Without turning round, she says to Joe:

(22) Pass me the hammer, will you?

Joe has no prior idea of the hammer, but he can find it on a chair after looking around. Comparing (7) to (22), we can see that in (7) the hearer has knowledge of the shelf in the room, whereas in (22), he has no knowledge of the hammer at the time Ann utters the request. The definite article in the hammer tells Joe that he can identify the hammer Ann is talking about (Lyons, 1999). Thus, where familiarity is tenuous, identifiability can take its place.

Identifiability can solve situations that familiarity cannot, especially in associative cases (e.g. the author is associated with a book). In (17), for instance, the association is probable rather than a known one, which has to do with familiarity. The journey from Ho Chi Minh City to Groningen nowadays will most likely involve an aircraft rather than a ship. As a result, the definite noun phrase the plane will help the hearer associate the referent with a plane taking off from Ho Chi Minh City.

Nevertheless, Lyons (1999) shows that there are cases in which identifiability is hardly a feature of definiteness. Rather, uniqueness is still a ‘powerful’ factor for explicating associate, situational, and cataphoric uses of the as in the following examples.

(23) I’ve just been to a wedding. The bride wore pink.
(24) [A student entering a lecture class at the beginning of a semester without referring to the faculty’s notice about a guest professor]
I wonder who the guest professor is this semester.
(25) Trang’s gone for a spin on the motorbike she has just bought. In (23) the hearer can infer that there is one bride at a wedding. Yet it would be ludicrous to say that the hearer can identify the bride. In (24) lecture classes involve instructors. On account of this, the phrase the guest professor is quite possible. However, can the speaker, in this case, identify the referent of the definite noun phrase? If the speaker cannot identify the referent, how can the hearer satisfy the expectation – to identify the referent? Although both participants have knowledge of the existence of an individual as a guest professor in this situation, this does not guarantee that identification is achieved. In (25) the relative clause provides a context for the occurrence of the motorbike; however, it does not ensure that the hearer is able to identify which motorbike Trang is using except when he sees Trang riding it.

Also, Hawkins (1978) indirectly challenges the notion of identifiable when he provides an example in which the indefinite article a is used instead of the in his criticism of Searle (1969).

(26) So you were at Eton, were you? Then you are certain to know a chap called Bill Snoop. (p. 98).

In (26) the hearer is given sufficient means to identify the referent, but the speaker still uses an indefinite NP. Probably to deal with the inadequacy of identifiability, Hawkins (1978: 167-168) introduces his location theory, according to which the speaker performs the following acts when using the definite article the:

He (a) introduces a referent (or referents) to the hearer; and (b) instructs the hearer to locate the referent in some shared set of objects…; and he (c) refers to the totality of the objects or mass within the set which satisfy the referring expression. (p. 167)

A shared set involves the knowledge that both speaker and hearer share of a given referent, which can be a physical or a mental object occurring in sets.
of different kinds. There are four conditions for the speech acts to be successful: (1) set existence, (2) set identifiability, (3) set membership, and (4) set composition. Condition (1) concerns the knowledge the speaker and hearer have of the set of objects that the definite referent is located in. Condition (2) refers to the hearer’s ability to infer which shared set is actually intended by the speaker. The act of inferring lies in the previous discourse or in the situation of utterance. Condition (3) is involved with the relation between the referent and the shared set. That is, the referent must exist in the shared set inferred. Condition (4), having three sub-parts, is concerned with the correspondence between the number of objects in the shared set satisfying the descriptive predicate and the linguistic referents referred to by the definite description.

To illustrate how the four conditions work, we will consider the following examples of communication breakdown (Hawkins, 1978: 168-170).

(27) a. I’ve just seen the professor again.
   b. I don’t think we’ve met before, have we?

(28) A: I’ve just seen the professor again.
    B: Which professor?
    A: Oh, didn’t I tell you?

(29) A: I’ve just spoken to the professor.
    B: What? That one over there?
    A: No, the one I was just talking to you about.

(30) (i) The two students
    (ii) The member of parliament
    (iii) The professors

Example (27) illustrates the important role of condition (1). The communication broke down in (27) because if the speaker and hearer do not know each other, they do not share a previous discourse set. That is, no previous talk-exchange has occurred between them. As a result, other conditions (i.e. identification and location) are ruled out.
Examples (28) and (29) demonstrate the relationship between conditions (2) and (3). They should work in harmony; if one of these conditions is not met, then communication may break down. In (28), condition (2) is met, but condition (3) is not. The cause of the break-down lies in the hearer’s knowledge that the referent was not actually a member of this set (condition 3) although he could identify some shared set pragmatically (condition 2). By contrast, (28) shows that condition (3) is met, but condition (2) is not. The breakdown arises because set identifiability failed, though the set membership condition was satisfied. The hearer did not know which shared set the speaker intended: a previous discourse set (i.e. the one I was just talking to you about) or an immediate situation set (i.e. that one over there).

Example set (30) is concerned with condition (4). The two students is possible if the number of students the speaker and hearer are referring to two. Or, similarly, the member of parliament is not possible if it refers to more than one entity in the larger situation set. And the professors can be difficult to locate if in the previous discourse set there was only one entity.

Although Hawkins has also been criticized (see Lyons, 1999 and Chesterman, 1991), Hawkins’ location theory can be seen as an attempt to redefine the notions of existentiality, uniqueness, and identifiability mentioned above. Existentiality and uniqueness are put in relation to speech-act participants. Two important issues found in location theory are the notions of a shared set and inclusiveness. Chesterman (1991: 17) describes the notion of a shared set as “a more precise way of defining the associated ‘something else’ that the hearer is assumed to be familiar with.” Inclusiveness is an aspect that has to do with the meaning of the definite article. The example set (30) relating to condition (4) mentioned above is
concerned with this notion. We will now discuss the relationship between inclusiveness and definiteness.

**Inclusiveness**

Before discussing how inclusiveness can be a factor in the meaning of definiteness, let us consider the following two examples (Hawkins, 1978)

(31) Bring us the wickets in after the game of cricket.
(32) We must ask you to move the sand from our gateway.

In these examples, the definite article is used with the plural noun *wickets* and the mass noun *sand*. What are the referents of the noun phrases *the wickets* in (31) and *the sand* in (32)? As we know, in cricket, there are six wickets, but how many wickets do we want the hearer to bring us? And in (32), are we satisfied if the hearer moves only part of the sand away?

If we hold the notion that uniqueness is applicable to a set or quantity instead of an individual, then what would happen if the hearer brought a set of four wickets, which according to the hearer can be the unique set? For the set of six wickets may have a number of subsets containing five wickets, four, three, or two wickets. Clearly, these subsets are irrelevant to us. It would disappoint us if he brought us a set of four wickets. In fact, what we are concerned with is the totality of the wickets or the whole set of six wickets. Similarly, we would not be satisfied if the hearer still left some sand in our gateway.

Thus it is argued that the notion of inclusiveness should complement and even incorporate the criterion of uniqueness (Hawkins 1978). The notion of totality in plural nouns or mass nouns when used with the definite article is similar in meaning to the universal quantifier *all* and the wickets in (31) may be understood as the unique maximal set of wickets by virtue of
the context. However, if the totality of the entities that satisfies a definite description is just one, then inclusiveness is equal to uniqueness.

However, Hawkins’ notion of inclusiveness has produced some objections. Chesterman (1991: 66-67) criticizes Hawkins for presenting inclusiveness in absolute, logical terms (i.e. all) and “raises major issues about the relation between logic and natural language.” He provides some counter-examples in which the universal-quantifier reading is not possible.

(33) The Americans have reached the moon.

In (33) it is impossible for all Americans to have reached the moon. The Americans in (33) should be understood as representative of a whole set. To Chesterman, the all incorporated with the meaning of the is similar to what we might call a pragmatic all, which means “all with respect to the relevant intents and purposes”, “more or less all” (p. 66).

Similarly, Huddleston (2002) notes that the idea of totality expressed in a noun phrase marked by the is not as emphatic as that found with universal quantification (i.e. all), given that all entities in the set are considered to be basically similar. That is, plural noun phrases marked by the do not suggest that every individual entity should have the predication property. Here are examples from Huddleston (2002: 370).

(34) a The bathroom tiles are cracked.
    b All the bathroom tiles are cracked.

The bathroom tiles in (34a) gives the impression that the totality of the tiles in the bathroom is cracked, but it does not mean that the ‘crackedness’ is found with every individual entity. By contrast, all the bathroom tiles in (34b) suggest that there is no exception for the ‘crackedness’ to be applied to every individual tile.
To summarize, we have considered some aspects of the nature of definiteness, which is a distinguishing criterion in the use of English articles. The aspects discussed are existentiality and uniqueness, familiarity, identifiability and locatability, and inclusiveness. Among these notions, two remain salient: *identifiability* and *inclusiveness* (Lyons, 1999). (Although Hawkins uses the term *locatability*, the generally agreed term is still *identifiability*. See Lyons, 1999.) The approaches used in treating these notions have shifted from an objective (Russell) to a less objective perspective where speech-act participants and context are taken into account. However, there is another approach—cognitive grammar by Langacker (1991; 1991b)—which is more subjective than Chesterman seems to advocate.

In Langacker’s approach, definiteness is accounted for by looking at how speech-act participants “construe” (conceive of) an entity and also includes the notions of mental contact and discourse space, but ignores the notion of reference, which is also a controversial notion in the literature. So before discussing Langacker’s notion of definiteness, we will first deal with referentiality, a notion that intersects with definiteness in that it distinguishes between an identified entity that is referential or non-referential. Because the notion of referentiality is intertwined with the notion of specificity, we will deal with both at the same time.

**Specificity and Referentiality**

Specificity and referentiality are two terms often found in treating definiteness. However, the difference between these two terms is not all that clear. Traditionally, in grammar books, the notion of specificity has to do with distinguishing a specific entity from a general entity (i.e. a set or sets). This may explain why Quirk *et al.* (1985) makes a distinction between
specific reference and generic reference when describing the use of the articles. Referentiality has to do with referring or pointing to something. This notion has frequently been used after the introduction of the notions of reference and speech-acts (Strawson, 1971; Searle, 1969). Generally, the two terms seem to be used interchangeably. In defining specificity, Brinton (2000: 292) says that specificity is concerned with whether or not a description conveyed by a NP refers to a specific entity in the real world. In this definition, the notion of reference is combined with specificity. Hence, a general distinction is often made as a result of combining specificity and definiteness. We have cases in which a specific entity is either definite or indefinite as in (35) and (36), and a non-specific entity is non-definite (37).

(35) A lion and two tigers are sleeping in the cage.
(36) I am going to clean the house.
(37) Pass me a book.

Researchers are still at variance with each other about whether or not definites and indefinites refer pragmatically or semantically and whether or not definites can be non-referential in the same way that indefinites can be. The first view holds that non-specific noun phrases describe, but do not refer (Donnellan, 1978; Fodor and Sag, 1982). This is the case of a book in (37). Similar to this view is a ‘weaker’ position (Lyons 1999: 165), which maintains that definite phrases may (but need not) refer, but indefinites do not. A lion in (35) does not refer because it is not identifiable to the hearer. Although the hearer may understand what is conveyed through the indefinite description, he may not be able to identify the lion in question.

The main difference between the first view and the weaker one is that the first view does not hold that definite NPs and indefinite NPs refer in a semantic sense (Neale 1990, Ludlow and Neale 1991). Based on Russell’s account (1905), they argue that simple definites and indefinites are to be considered quantificational rather than directly referential. However, this
does not mean that this view rejects the notion of reference, but reference is limited to proper nouns, demonstratives, and personal pronouns, whose meaning is to pick out an individual entity.

Lyons (1999: 166) takes a non-committal position in saying that definites and indefinites are “potentially referring.” He does not commit himself to either side in explicating the reference from a pragmatic or semantic point of view, but he does argue that the specific—non-specific distinction applies equally to both definite and indefinite noun phrases. The mechanism that influences such a distinction involves certain grammatical contexts, which may create an ambiguous reading: specific (referential) or non-specific (non-referential) in two types of contexts: opaque and transparent.

We will first consider how opaque contexts influence specificity. Opaque contexts, simply put, are the ones in which, on the non-specific interpretation, a co-referential expression is not ‘eligible’ to be used to substitute for the noun phrase in question. For example, in (38) a Norwegian can have a non-specific interpretation and then it is possible to substitute one is possible, but impossible to substitute a Norwegian with him.

(38) Hillie wants to marry a Norwegian, though she hasn’t met one / *him yet.

The proposition in the continuation can clarify the meaning, but if it is not provided, the sentence is ambiguous because it may have a specific or non-specific reading. The reason why a co-referential pronoun is not possible lies in the fact that the verb want in (38) presents a proposition which is potential or not factual. The Norwegian Hillie wants to marry is in Hillie’s desire, and through the continuation “she has not met a Norwegian yet” it is clear that he is not yet a ‘factual’ or specific person. Him would be possible
if a Norwegian is a specific person as in “Hillie wants to marry a Norwegian, but she hasn’t told him yet.”

Verbs such as believe, intend, hope, believe (i.e. “propositional attitude” verbs) or intensional verbs (e.g. look for) are like want in that they are hypothetical or counterfactual. A similar characterization obtains in other structures such as negation, questions, conditionals, modals, future tense. In the following examples of opaque contexts from Lyons (1999: 168), we can see that non-specificity is also applicable to noun phrases used with the definite article.

(39) a. I’m going to buy a suit tomorrow – you’ll be horrified by the colour.
b. I’m going to buy a suit tomorrow – even if I can’t find one I really like.

(40) a. I’m going to have lunch with the president tomorrow – I’m dreading it, he’s such a boring man.
b. I’m going to have lunch with the president tomorrow – that is, if the election takes place today and we have a president.

In each set of examples, there are two readings based on the continuations. Without them, ambiguity arises. Thus, the referential reading is found in the (a) examples and the non-referential in the (b) examples. Other near equivalent terms for specific reading are extension, de re, or referential and for non-specific reading, intension, de dicto or non-referential.

As (40b) illustrates, the specific—non-specific distinction is not just limited to noun phrases marked by the indefinite article. According to the standard account, the agent that causes the availability of two readings of noun phrases in opaque contexts is the so-called “scope ambiguity.” (For a detailed account, see Lyons 1999: 169-170).
Second, the distinction of specificity also exists in transparent contexts (non-opaque contexts). Here are some examples concerning indefinite noun phrases (Lyons 1999: 170).

(41) a. I haven’t started the class yet; I’m missing a student—Mary’s always late.
    b. I haven’t started the class yet; I’m missing a student—there should be fifteen, and I only count fourteen.

Two readings are available in the (41) set. In (41a), a student is specific because the speaker has in mind a particular individual, and Mary in the continuation refers to a student. In (41b), non-referentiality is the case since the identity of the student is not the focus although the speaker seems to be ‘specific’ when she knows that she misses one student. According to Lyons, the distinction between the (a) and (b) reading lies in a pragmatic rather than semantic explanation. That is, “there is no ambiguity in the sense of each such sentence having two semantic representations (different either lexically or in structure). Rather, the expression is vague between readings on which the speaker either has or does not have a particular referent for the indefinite noun phrase in mind” (p. 171).

The specific—non-specific distinction in transparent contexts also obtain in definite noun phrases as seen in (42), where (42a) is referential, and (42b) non-referential.

(42) a. We can’t start the seminar, because the student who’s giving the presentation is absent—typical of Bill, he’s so unreliable.
    b. We can’t start the seminar, because the student who’s giving the presentation is absent— I’d go and find whoever it is, but no-one can remember, and half the class is absent. (Lyons, 1999: 172)

A similar distinction is found in Donnellan’s well-known example (1966) in (43), although other theorists tend to use different terminology for the distinction in question: referential versus attributive.
(43) **Smith’s murderer** is insane. (i.e. The murderer of Smith)

In one reading of (43), the referential one, the referent of Smith’s murderer (or the murderer of Smith) is specific. A certain individual such as John, Doreen’s neighbor, the guy in the black suit, is designated through the use of the description. In the other reading of (43), the attributive one, the description can be applied to anybody who killed Smith. In this case, the referent is non-specific.

From Lyons’ account, it can be observed that the specific—non-specific distinction applies equally to both definite and indefinite noun phrases in both opaque and transparent contexts. The issue is more complex in transparent contexts when there is a correspondence between the different readings of definites and those of indefinites as a result of the intersection between the elements of specificity and those of definiteness. According to Ludlow and Neale (1991) and Larson and Segal (1995), as cited in Lyons, a “referential” use must be distinguished from a “specific” use for both definites and indefinites. We have a referential use when a speaker intends to communicate something about a particular individual and expects the hearer to identify which individual is intended. By contrast, we have a specific use, when the speaker, though he has in mind a particular individual, does not intend the hearer to realize any particular individual. Along this line, if the attributive use in (43) is taken into consideration, clearly, as Lyons (p. 172) remarks, “these uses are both distinct from the attributive or non-specific use, which is purely quantificational, involving no individual ‘referent’ at any level.”

Although the issue is still under debate, we can infer that what matters is whether or not an entity is definite. Although the distinction between a specific referent and a non-specific referent can be useful for indefinite NPs in co-referential cases, the main criterion in terms of article

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usage is whether the noun marked by an article is definite or non-definite. That is, if speaker and hearer can uniquely identify the referent, then the article *the* is used, and if not, *a* is used. This is probably the reason why Langacker (1991: 97-98) suggests that it is not necessary for specificity to be known when he introduces the notion *mental contact*.

In the next section we will look at Langacker’s view, which entails a different view entirely because he argues that the notion of reference is not necessarily included in the notion of definiteness. Definiteness is achieved when both speaker and hearer can contact an entity mentally as unique, so it is not necessary for the entity involved to be real or referential; mere awareness of the entity is quite sufficient.

**Definiteness in cognitive grammar**

Langacker (1991), who bases his account on Hawkins (1978), provides the following description of definiteness:

“Use of the definite article with type description T in a nominal implies that (i) the designated instance t₁ of T is unique and maximal in relation to the current discourse space; (2) S has mental contact with t₁; and (3) either H has mental contact with t₁ or the nominal alone is sufficient to establish it.” (p. 98)

Leaving the notion of *type* aside for the time being (it will be discussed in the second part of this chapter), we can conclude that definiteness, to Langacker, lies in 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. It involves uniqueness and maximality (i.e. inclusiveness). To attain successful communication, the participants should rely on their ability to of reach one another’s mental space within the discourse space. Put differently, two prerequisites for establishing definiteness are discourse space and mental contact.
Langacker’s discourse space is based on Fauconnier’s notion of ‘mental space’ (1985). A mental space, which is comprised of a set of elements and relations, is a conceived situation that may have various degrees of complexity. Mental spaces are created, evoked, or modified as a result of the addition of new elements and relations throughout the process of discourse. Specifically, one space can be included in another and the relations among the elements of different spaces may be established too. Thus, mental spaces in a person’s mind are either his or her conception of reality in the present and past or his or her vision in the future; even those aspects of the present or past s/he has no knowledge of. These mental spaces are distinguished and manipulated easily by a person, although they may have considerable variation in cognitive and logical status. It is worth noting that what one person is capable of, with regard to conceiving reality and manipulating mental spaces, can also be understood by another person since the other’s capacity is comparable to his or her own. This suggests that “person A’s conception of person B’s view of reality (or some other mental space available to B) can be regarded as a subspace within A’s own reality conception” (Langacker 1991: 97).

A variant of a mental space is what Langacker (1991) calls current discourse space. The current discourse space, which is shared by the speaker (S) and hearer (H), is made up of those elements and relations construed as a basis for communication at a given moment in the flow of discourse. The realm of the current discussion is interpreted as that containing those entities constituting the space. They are immediately available to both S and H, who can figure them out in their conscious awareness or elicit them easily through association or simple inference. The entities making up 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!).

A current discourse space is needed for establishing mental contact. Mental contact concerns an entity being singled out for individual conscious awareness in the conceptualizer’s current psychological state. Speech-act participants can have mental contact easily with an instance (i.e. an entity conveyed by the noun marked by an article) even when the entity involved does not exist or does not refer to something in the real world as long as it exists in some mental space; in addition, nothing specific need be known about it. Some examples will illustrate the point.

(44) Once upon a time, there was a beautiful princess who lived with an ugly frog in a castle overlooking a championship golf course….

(45) David wants to catch a fish.

In (44), there is a vague description of the characters and the setting (a princess, a frog, a castle, and a golf course), and they are presumed to be imaginary, but the hearer will not experience any difficulty in being aware of them. In (45), 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 David’s desire; whereas, the specific reading suggests only that David 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 David’s mind and that it is the fish he wants to catch.
Definiteness and non-definiteness therefore can be explained on the basis of the awareness or unawareness that speech-act participants have towards a thing expressed by a noun marked by an article. If speech-act participants share an awareness of an entity, they should be able to uniquely and maximally identify (i.e. inclusive) it.

Concluding definiteness

Some recapitulation may be useful at this point. So far in this chapter, we have explored the defining elements of definiteness. Four meanings have been advocated from different research traditions: uniqueness, familiarity, identifiability, and inclusiveness. We argued that these four meanings can be amalgamated into two: identifiability and inclusiveness. Identifiability subsumes familiarity, and inclusiveness subsumes uniqueness. We have also explored the interrelation between definiteness and specificity. What can be concluded from Lyons’ account is that specificity can be applied to both definite and indefinite noun phrases, and that referential and specific use may need to be distinguished by means of pragmatic factors. To resolve these issues, we introduced Langacker’s notion of mental contact, which is the only prerequisite for definiteness. If a speaker and hearer achieve mental contact, then they can uniquely identify an entity, and factors such as referentiality and specificity are redundant. Awareness and nothing else is sufficient.

Let us now consider another aspect of the meaning of the English articles. That is, the relation between definiteness and genericity.
GENERICITY

Some differences between definiteness and genericity can be noted at the outset. Definiteness versus non-definiteness is marked by the form of the article: *the* for definiteness and *a* or zero for non-definiteness. Genericity does not have one form. It has been agreed that all three forms of the articles (*the, a* or zero), when used with NPs, may have a generic reading as in (46), even though other factors such as aspect, frequency adverbs, the meaning of the predicate (e.g. a verb) have their impact too. (For details on these contextual factors, see Lawler, 1972, Ihalainen, 1974; Smith, 1975; Lyons, 1999.)

(46) a. **A cat** has four legs.
   b. **The cat** has four legs.
   c. **Cats** have four legs.
   d. (The cats have four legs).

In capturing the nature of genericity, most theorists view generic NPs as those whose reference is made to an entire class as a whole – the class in question being that consisting of all the entities satisfying the description inherent in the noun or nominal (Lyons, 1999: 179). Or to Huddleston (2002), generic NPs can be understood as those expressions denoting the situation type called unlimited states, which potentially hold for all time. Hence a relevant factor concerning the nature of genericity is the nature of the class reference. Lyons remarks that theoretical trends have focused on whether the reference is to the class as (1) an entity, (2) a “second-order” individual, or to the class as (3) the “aggregate” of its members (i.e. the generalization is about the members of the class).

As with definiteness, theorists do not share similar views with respect to the possibility and precise nature of a generic reading in relation to the articles. Generally, they disagree with each other about what
constitutes a generic NP (Chesterman, 1991). They are still doubtful whether or not the + Plural N (Burton-Roberts, 1976; Quirk et al. 1985), the zero article (Burton-Roberts, 1981) and a (Jespersen, 1949) have a generic status. Even these native speakers have different readings of genericness. Based on Smith (1975), Chesterman (1991) provides the following examples along with his comments.

(47) **The idea** is more perfect than the object. (generic for Vendler (1968: 20; ‘dubious’ for Smith)
(48) **A beaver** built dams in prehistoric times. (generic for Smith, unacceptable on a generic reading for Perlmutter (1970))
(49) **Time** elapses more quickly in old age than in childhood. (non-generic for Smith, generic for Chesterman)
(50) **Ideas** are alien to the undergraduate. (non-generic for Smith, generic for Chesterman)
(51) **The true lover** kisses whenever the opportunity presents itself. (starred by Smith, grammatical and generic for Chesterman)

In line with these differences in opinion, there is evidence that genericity cannot be considered a ‘unified’ phenomenon (Chesterman, 1991: 34). For generic articles have different distributions and are not in free variation, as seen in the following examples.

(52) a. **The lion** is becoming extinct.
    b. **Lions** are becoming extinct.
    c. *A lion* is becoming extinct.
    b. **A book** fills leisure time for many people.

The explanation given for the ungrammaticality of (52c) is that it cannot semantically satisfy the class predicate be extinct. In (53) by contrast, (53a) is ungrammatical because there is no class predicate. Even so, there are examples that show that a generic reading can be achieved for all three forms, even when class predicates are absent (Chesterman, 1991).

(54) a. **The rabbit** likes carrots. (generic or non-generic)
    b. **Rabbits** like carrots. (generic only)
c. **A rabbit** likes carrots. (generic or non-generic)

From these bits of evidence, we may conclude that a generic reading is not the same for each of the articles. It seems that the intrinsic meaning of each particular article has exerted its influence on the interpretation of a NP as generic or non-generic. Let us now turn our attention to the articles and see how linguists account for their generic use. We will see that different views are projected when analyzing the meanings of the so-called generic articles.

**Generic a**

The indefinite article *a* used with a noun is thought to have a generic reading when it is a representation of a species (i.e. *a typical X* by Chesterman, 1991). At the same time, in instructional materials, it is often presented as the equivalent of ‘any’. In this discussion, we will see that the issue is not that simple. There are cases that ‘generic’ *a + N* is not paraphrasable by *any* and doubts have been raised concerning the status of genericity for *a*.

We will start first with the case in which indefinite singular generics, *a N*, is not acceptable (in relation to other generics), while *the lion* is acceptable as in *The / *A lion is becoming extinct*. One account, introduced earlier and repeated here in detail, maintains that the predicate determines the appropriateness in interpreting the class as an entity, a second-order individual, or the aggregate of its members as introduced earlier. Class predicates such as *be extinct, be numerous, die out, abound* require a class (or group) expression\(^3\) as subject. This explains why *the lion* is acceptable and *a lion* is not. For extinction is a property of the class as a whole. The class generic, *the N*, refers to the class as a whole, while *a N*, does not. Burton-Roberts (1976) elaborates by explaining that *a tiger* is ruled out

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\(^3\) Class expressions are those that refer to the class as a whole or a unit.
because “becoming extinct” is an accidental property – not an inherent characteristic. The indefinite singular generic represents a “property generic.” It denotes the intension of the noun with no extension. As a result, this generic type, a N, can only take predicates which express inherent or defining characteristics as in A whale is a mammal, where a whale denotes “being a whale” or “whale-hood.” But it is hardly possible to say that *A lion is becoming extinct. If the sentence were produced, it would suggest that the inherent property of being a lion is equal to becoming extinct. Thus, it is understandable that an accidental property such as becoming extinct cannot be predicated of the intension of a noun.

Another possible reason for the fact that generic a is not equivalent to other generics may lie in the meaning associated with paraphrases involving any (Perlmutter, 1970, in Burton-Roberts 1976). Some linguists, however, do not agree generic a can coincide with any. Burton-Roberts (1976) provides the following counter-examples where oddity results from the substitution of any for generic a.

(55) a. A kitchen is a cooking room.
   b. *Any kitchen is a cooking room.
(56) a. A whale suckles its young.
   b. *Any whale suckles its young.
(57) a. An eagle, which is the national bird, is generally only seen by zoo visitors.
   b. *Any eagle, which is the national bird, is generally seen only by zoo visitors.

The unacceptability found in the (55-57) b-examples suggests that any cannot underlie generic a. Actually, the underlying structure of the a-examples, to Burton-Roberts, is to be x. However, there are cases in which “any does appropriately paraphrase the indefinite article in the subject N--

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4 The term extension refers to the set of entities satisfying the description; intension, by contrast, refers to the sense or the description itself (Lyons, 1999: 183).
5 Readers who are interested in this issue, please read Burton-Roberts (1976).
namely those in which the subject is modified by a restrictive relative clause (i.e. a non-generic relative clause), or by a pre-posed modifier derived from one” (pp. 440-441). Here are some examples, also from Burton-Roberts.

(58)  
   a. *A whale* which is sick yields no blubber.  
   b. *Any whale* which is sick yields no blubber.  

(59)  
   a. *A hungry lion* is a dangerous animal.  
   b. *Any hungry lion* is a dangerous animal.  

The acceptability of (58b) and (59b) lies in the fact that the sentences, (58a) and (59a), are not generic; rather, they are general statements. He presumes that general statements are non-specific indefinite on the basis of the relationship between (58b) and (59b) and (60) and (61) that follow:

(60)  
   If *a whale* is sick, *it* yields no blubber.  

(61)  
   If *a lion* is hungry, *it* is a dangerous animal.  

The status of (60) and (61) is similar to that in (62) and (63), where genericity is out of the question.

(62)  
   If *a duck* is trapped, I go out of my way to help *it*.  

(63)  
   If *a girl* has a complaint, *she* can go to the chaperone.  

From this evidence, Burton-Roberts concludes that non-specific indefinite rather than generic is paraphrasable by *any*.

Some other theorists take another view when considering generic *a* as coinciding with non-specific *a* (Christophersen, 1939; Hawkins, 1978). Hawkins explains that a generic indefinite NP is similar to a non-specific indefinite NP in that their reference is to a single object that is random and arbitrary to both speaker and hearer. Both speaker and hearer do not have a particular referent in mind. However, Chesterman disagrees when stating that a generic reading “must sometimes be distinguished from a non-specific one.” He provides an example from Burton-Roberts (1981).

(64)  
   *An Indian* smokes a pipe every night.
An Indian in (64) is ambiguous because it has three readings: specific, non-specific, and generic. The fact that it can be construed as generic proves that coinciding generic indefinites with non-specific indefinites is not “quite right” (Chesterman, 1991: 35).

Although Chesterman may be right, the fact is that the article a used with a noun in what is called ‘generic’ contexts does not refer to an actual entity but a concept, which seems to suggest that it is also non-specific (See Burton-Roberts, 1976). This can be the reason why Langacker (1991), from a cognitive grammar perspective, agrees with Hawkins that a noun used with a in generic statements expresses a non-specific, arbitrary instance. To Langacker, the notion of arbitrary instance in relation to a mental space can explain the generic use of a. An illustration can be seen in the well-known example.

(65) A beaver builds dams.

In this example, a beaver is non-specific because both S and H have no pre-existing mental contact with the referent (i.e. instance) designated by the a-marked noun (also called as a nominal). “The instance is conjured up just for purposes of making the generic statement and as such is thought of as a representative instance of the category rather than a particular instance known on independent grounds” (p. 106). With reference to the notion mental space introduced earlier, a beaver is considered to be part of a special mental space, R’, which represents a fragment of the speaker’s conception of “how the world is structured” (p. 106). This special world-knowledge mental space, hosted by the speaker, is distinguished from the present reality mental space (R) of the speaker and hearer. Therefore, because the speech-act participants have no previous mental contact with a beaver because it is not situated in the present reality mental space, it is non-specific.
Generic the

Generic the is found with singular nouns and plural nouns. Used with a singular noun, like the horse, generic the refers to a genus or a species ‘horse’. However, with respect to plural nouns, some linguists do not agree by arguing that there can be no more than one ‘horse’ genus before dealing with cognitive grammar. Let us now examine how linguists treat the+plural N and see whether it treats the+singular N as generic or definite NPs.

According to Chesterman (1991), the+plural N can have a generic reading on the condition that reference is made to a set of subspecies. He provides the following examples.

(66) Among the lizards, iguanas are the most popular as a focal food.
(67) Bjorn wants to gather statistics on at least three whales that are threatened with extinction. Ideally, the whales should all be most numberous in the same part of the world. (Burton-Roberts, 1981)
(68) He likes the wines of this shop. (Quirk et al., 1972)

In (67) the lizards should be interpreted as a family of lizard types or all the types of lizards. In (67) the reference of the whales is to kinds of whales. And similarly, the brands or types of wine available in the shop is the only reading found in (68).

Hawkins (1978) questions whether the label ‘generic’ should be applied to the+Plural N when actually generic the with plural nouns is similar to non-generic definite plurals if the inclusiveness principle is taken into consideration. Based on Christophersen (1939) and Bolinger (1975), he maintains that the notion of ‘singling out’ or delimitation is still inherent in the definite article when it is used with plural nouns. By comparing the+plural N with bare plurals (i.e. plural nouns used with the zero article), he explains that all plural definite descriptions are characterized through...
their possibility of being located within a pragmatic set. Bare plural NPs, by contrast, are not subject to such delimitation. Here are some examples:

(69)  
   a. The climate of southern California is ideal for **Samoans**.
   b. The climate of southern California is ideal for **the Samoans**. (Christophersen (1939)).

(70)  
   a. **Italians** are musical.
   b. **The Italians** are musical.

The bare plurals Samoans (69a) refer to all Samoans, who may live in other places outside southern California. The Samoans in (69b) is limited to those who live in southern California. Similarly, the property of being musical is applied to all Italians in (70a). The predication of *be musical* is pertinent to anyone who either is, has been, or will be an Italian. The definite plural NP in (70b) by contrast, is interpreted as “those individuals of Italian parentage who currently inhabit Italy” (Hawkins, 1978: p. 217). In terms of quantity, *Italians* refers to more individuals than *the Italians*. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the reference of *the Italians* is made in relation to the world in which the speaker and the hearer live. This relationship hence can lead to ambiguity as in (70b) (Lyons 1999: 193) because it may refer to the Italians mentioned before, known to the speaker and hearer—a point that Hawkins fails to mention.

In cognitive grammar, a plural noun such as *pebbles* in *the pebbles* is considered to designate a set consisting of two or more instances. This set is considered to be an instance of the *pebbles* category. That is, *pebbles* is similar to a mass which cannot be further pluralized. Hence, the whole mass can be regarded as one instance (i.e. of the *pebbles* category in this case) (Langacker, 1991: 81). When used with the definite *the*, the whole mass is likely to be considered to be unique on the basis of the context it occurs. Clearly there is a maximal implication suggested in the structure, which corresponds to Hawkin’s inclusiveness (1978) mentioned earlier.
With respect to ‘generic’ the used with a singular noun, Langacker (1991) considers 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. The categories can be sequenced in an order referred to as a type hierarchy (e.g. thing > animal > mammal > cat). The nominal ‘the cat,’ for instance, is construed to be unique if it does not refer to instances (i.e. individual members) of the type or genus cat, but as a type having only one instance (i.e. the only species). Constrained in this way, which is also shared in accordance with Givón (1993), the nominal has a definite meaning because the whole species is interpreted as a unique instance. This is the reason why instances (i.e. individual members) can be considered to be the lowest level in the type hierarchy (i.e. genus hierarchy) if they are construed as a unique instance of the type. Consider the following example from Langacker.

(71) The okapi and the wombat are two mammals seldom found in zoos.

In (71) the nominals-- the okapi and the wombat— are generically interpreted. In cognitive grammar, they are construed as types rather than particular instances of okapi or wombat. They take the definite article because they are contextually unique. That is, there is only one instance of each type in question: okapi and wombat. Therefore, the term ‘generic’ seems to be unnecessary to be applied to the definite article. What is worth distinguishing is whether a noun used with the is construed as an instance or as a type having only one instance.
Generic zero

In discussing generic uses, linguists wonder whether or not a generic reading lies in an article-marked noun itself or in other factors in a sentence, such as the predicate (e.g. a verb). This is the reason why doubts have been raised about the ‘all’ reading found in generic statements in which the zero article occurs with either a mass noun or a plural noun. Also, with respect to the zero article, the term ‘generic’ again is put to question. Let us consider the former issue first. In (72)

(72) **Oil** floats on water.

*Oil*, a mass noun, can be paraphrased as *all oil floats on water*. However, a generic reading paraphrased as *all* is inappropriate in some cases.

(73) **Rabbits** like carrots.

We cannot be certain that ‘all’ rabbits like carrots. A relevant quantifier as *in general* (Biggs, 1978) or a generic verb such as *tend* (Lawler, 1972) can be used to paraphrase (73). Also either *most* or *at least most* can paraphrase the noun marked with the zero article in generic contexts (Lawler, 1972; Chesterman, 1991).

Although a generic reading as *at least most* applied to nouns marked by the zero form seems to be adequate, there are cases in which it is difficult to decide whether those nouns are generic or non-generic. The problem is found mostly with bare plural NPs and theorists provide conflicting answers with regard to this issue. Burton-Roberts (1976), for example, proposes considering the NPs “determined by the so-called generic zero” to be non-generic. Here is some evidence from Burton-Roberts (1976: 443).

(74) a. In Canada, **the beaver** is hunted by professionals.
b. In Canada, **beavers** are hunted by professionals.

(75) a. In Canada, professionals hunt **the beaver**.
b. In Canada, professionals hunt beavers.

(76) a. Lions are increasing in number.
    b. The number of lions is increasing in number.

(77) a. The rabbit is suffering from myxomatosis.
    b. Rabbits are suffering from myxomatosis.
    c. A rabbit is suffering from myxomatosis.

The definite generic NP (74a) and the bare NP determined by generic zero (74b) are generally considered to be generic. However, in the set of (75), where the sentences are active, the definite NP is generic, and the bare plural NP is not. In (76a), lions is a “putative” generic zero; in (76b), where it is a paraphrase of (76a), it is a non-specific zero. In the (77) set, a rabbit in (77c) is clearly specific. The rabbit in (77a) may be ambiguous between the definite reading and the generic reading. In (77b), by contrast, “there seems to be no plausible distinction between generic and non-specific”. These observations have been grounds for Burton-Roberts to suggest that we “abandon” the notion of plural indefinite generic.

A partly different view from Burton-Roberts’, which according to Lyons is widely accepted, is from Carlson (2002), who postulates the idea that bare plurals (i.e. plural nouns with the zero article) are semantically the same, whether they are used generically or non-generically. To Carlson, two interpretations of bare plurals, the generic (kind-referring) and the existential (indefinite or non-generic), can be unified on the basis of kind-referring. Carlson maintains that ambiguity (i.e. the generic and indefinite plural interpretations) is not available as a result of contextual factors that are “independently motivated and are needed elsewhere in the grammar to account for interpretations of certain constructions that are wholly distinct syntactically from zero NP” (2002: 53). When ambiguity arises, it is some predicates that are the cause of the problem. For some predicates may be interpreted either as being characteristic or eventful. Here are some examples from Carlson.
Frogs are clever.
Frogs are awake.
Dinosaurs ate kelp.

Frogs in (78) is understood to be generic, as opposed to the non-generic reading found in (79). No ambiguity occurs in (78) and (79) because the predicates in those sentences have only one interpretation. In (78), a property is predicated of being clever. As a result, it selects the generic reading. In (79), the predicate reports an event; it selects the non-generic reading. In (80), by contrast, ambiguity arises because of the availability of two readings that the simple past ate reveals: eating kelp can be a characteristic of dinosaurs or can be a past event.

Lyons (1999: 190) remarks that the predicate is not the only factor that may cause different interpretations: generic and non-generic. Other elements such as locative expression and information structure are also those worth considering. The following are his examples.

(81) a. Lions live in Africa – so if you want to see lions, that’s where you have to go.
    b. Lions live in Africa – in fact there are more lions in Africa than any other continent.

(82) a. Cats mess in loose soil.
    b. Cats mess in gardens other than their own.
    c. Cats mess in the open air.
    d. Cats mess in my garden.

In (81), a generic reading is found in (81a), and a non-generic in (81b). A difference in intonation is possible, as Lyons notes, as a result of a difference in structuring information. Lions in (81) is the topic of the sentence because the discussion is likely about lions. Conversely, the discussion in (81b) is probably about Africa. This renders the bare plural lions in (81b) to be the comment of the sentence. In (82), a non-generic

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6 In English, the simple past may represent both habitual and punctual aspect, which has to do with property and a non-state event.
reading is impossible in (82a-c), but it is available in (82d). Given the fact that the predicate mess is similar in those sentences, the factor that may create different readings are the locative expressions. A generic reading is available with those expressions which have a general interpretation. This explains why cats in (82d) is non-generic.

With respect to cognitive grammar, Langacker (1991) does not specify conditions for a generic reading with generic masses (i.e. either a plural noun like cats or a mass noun like water). However, insights into how generic masses are cognitively construed, combined with the presentations above, can make the issue clearer. To Langacker (1991: 551), a bare plural is regarded as a reference mass, $RT$, which is the maximal extension of a category or a type $t_i$ in the current discourse space. It is “a hypothetical mass with respect to which a profiled mass is assessed as constituting some proportion.” A plural noun like cats resembles a mass noun like water because it comprises all instances of cats, which are non-discrete and overlapping. Any subpart of cats, including the whole set, counts as a valid instance of the cats type. Expressed in a notation, it is $ti = RT$, in which an instance of a type is equal to a reference mass. This is how English captures the construal of a generic mass as indefinite. Syntactically, a reference mass is used with a zero article, which places no restriction on its magnitude. 

Nations in 83 is an example.

(83) **Nations** have natural disasters.

The presence of the zero article suggests that there is no restriction on the magnitude of the mass and thus the reference mass nations may includes $RT$ as a whole or any subpart or proportion of $RT$. This explanation is analogous to Chesterman’s (1991) paraphrase “ranging from all to at least most” introduced earlier. The plural NP in 83 has a generic reference because “nothing is done to single out any portion of $RT$ (p. 101). Only if a portion of
R₁ is singled out for individual awareness, then the definite article, the crucial aspect of definiteness, should be used. Semantically, a reference mass, with its maximal instance in the relevant discourse space could be construed as definite because it is unique. (For this reason it will be argued that in Chapter 5, non-count nouns in Vietnamese are construed as being neutral with regard to definiteness or non-definiteness when they are used generically.)

Langacker’s explanation is in line with Quirk et al’s notion of categorical meaning if a plural noun is construed as referring to a type (i.e. category), and the magnitude conveyed by the zero article ranges from a relative size to a maximal size, depending on the context in which the nominal occurs. To them, the generic meaning of the zero article is “no more than a special variant of [the] categorical meaning” (Quirk et al. 1985: 275).

Concluding genericity

It is obvious that genericity is also a notion that is difficult to capture. However, if we compare the use of the three articles—the, a, and the zero article in expressing genericity, we can conclude that each article also retains some of its prototypical sense. A singles out one instance to stand for all others, as in “A beaver builds dams”, but because it is only one single instance it cannot be used in a full generic sense as in “A beaver is becoming extinct”. In its generic use, the singles out a whole class as a whole, as in “The beaver builds dams”, and because it includes all members, it may be used fully generically as in “The beaver is becoming extinct.” But the full generic sense of the also explains the ungrammaticality of (52) “The book fills leisure time of many people” because a human cannot possibly read the whole class of books in his leisure time. Finally, in its generic use,
the zero article is rather vague and ‘assists’ nouns in reaching full generic reference on the basis of its predication (i.e. no restriction on magnitude) and can therefore be used in either a vague sense as “Beavers may be dangerous” or in a full generic senses as in “Beavers are becoming extinct”.

CONCLUSION: DEFINITENESS AND GENERICITY

Now that we have looked at how “definiteness” and “genericity” may be explained from different research traditions, we believe that the cognitive grammar framework is most useful in language teaching because it is most elegant in that it only needs a few principles to explain the many uses of the articles coherently. However, insights from other research traditions may also be used in explanations, either in cases where cognitive grammar does not explicitly state solutions or in cases where cognitive grammar insights are too theoretical to be understood by a non-linguist language learner. In the next chapter, we will move away from these theoretical explanations and look in more detail at how English articles are used in practice.