Definiteness and Indefiniteness

A Study in Reference and Grammaticality Prediction

John A. Hawkins

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A Study in Reference and Grammaticality Prediction

JOHN A. HAWKINS

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CONTENTS

Preface 11

Introduction 13

The Background of Research 13
Goals of the Present Study 14
Summary of the Book 16

1. Meaning and Grammaticality Prediction in Generative Grammar 20

Chomsky (1957) 20
Ross's Principle of Semantic Relevance 23
Katz and Postal (1964) 24
Chomsky (1965): The Standard Theory 28
Post-Aspects: The Late 1960s 28
Chomsky's Extended Standard Theory 32
Lakoff's Semantic Input Arguments 34
Lakoff's Semantic Sensitivity Arguments 36
Jackendoff's (1972) Interpretive Semantic Component 39
Overview 40

2. Syntactic and Semantic Causes of Ungrammaticality 43

Some Compatible and Incompatible Rules 45
Dative Movement and Passive 46
Reflexive and Subject-to-object Raising 46
Adverb Preposing and Passive 46
Extraposition from NP and Relative Clause Reduction 47
Be-contraction 50
Fronting Root Transformations 52
Affix-hopping and Do-support 54
Reflexive and Passive 56
That Placement and Equi-NP Deletion 58
Phrase-structure Incompatibilities 60
Partial Incompatibilities 62
That Placement and Relative Clause Formation 64
Question Formation and Complex NP Shift 65
The Syntactic Oppositions Underlying Rule Incompatibility 66

Some Semantic Oppositions Underlying Rule Incompatibility 69
Distinguishing Syntactic from Semantic Oppositions 72

3. The Referential Meaning of Definiteness 86

Section 1: On Adequately Describing and Explaining Semantic Facts 86
Section 2: The Inadequacies of Current Theories of the Definite Article 92
Russell's Theory of Definite Descriptions 92
Strawson's Reply 94
Searle (1969): Reference as a Speech Act 96
Christopherson's Familiarity Theory 99
Summary of the Appropriateness Problem 103
Section 3: Some Major Usage Types of the Definite Article 106
Anaphoric and Immediate Situation Uses 107
Larger Situation Uses 115
Associative Anaphoric Uses 123
Section 4: The 'Unfamiliar' Uses of the Definite Article in Noun Phrases with Explanatory Modifiers 130
Establishing Relative Clauses 131
Associative Clauses 138
NP-Complements 140
Nominal Modifiers 146
'Unexplanatory' Modifiers 148
Section 5: Some Differences between the Definite Article and Demonstratives 149
Section 6: The Inclusiveness of Definite Reference 157
Section 7: Summary of the Speech Acts and Appropriateness Conditions of Definite Reference According to the Location Theory 167

4. The Semantic Contrast between Definiteness and Indefiniteness 172

Some Appropriate Usage Possibilities for Indefinites 173
The Exclusiveness of Indefinite Reference 175
The Speech Acts and Appropriateness Conditions of Indefinite Reference 186
On a Non-alternative to Exclusiveness 191
Non-located Specific Indefinites 197
Explaining the Logical Contrast between Definiteness and Indefiniteness 201

Specific and Non-specific Indefinites 203
Non-specificness and Exclusiveness 208
Definite and Indefinite Generics 214
Have, Be and Set-existential Verbs 221
Relative Clauses and Exclusiveness 224

5. Ungrammaticalities Arising from the Semantic Contrast between Definiteness and Indefiniteness 228

Only 229
-est Superlatives 233
On the Non-syntactic Nature of these Article + Modifier Co-occurrence Restrictions 236
Comparatives: The Bigger Dog of the Two 240
Associative Clauses 241
Predicational Relatives 245
Sameness, Similarity and Identity 247
The Aforementioned Reference 253
Comparatives: The Bigger Dog than NP 255
Establishing Relatives with Indefinite NPs 263
The Syntactic-Semantic Unity of Definites, Stressed Indefinites, Generics and Indefinites with Establishing Relatives 265
Demonstratives 267
NP-Complements and Noun Modifiers 271
Article + Modifier Ungrammaticalities in Generative Grammar 272
Overview 276

6. Conclusions and Hypotheses for the Theory of Grammar 280

Restrictive and Appositive Relative Clauses 282
The Extent of the Role of Semantics in Grammaticality Prediction 289
Some Grammatical Contradictions 292
Chomsky's Selectional Restrictions 298
Overview 300

Notes 304

References 307

Index 312

I would like to dedicate this book to
my parents, Eric and Ellen Hawkins.

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PREFACE

This book, which is a revised version of my University of Cambridge PhD thesis, is concerned with the definite article, *the*, and the indefinite articles, *a* and *some*, in English. It provides an integrated pragmatic-semantic theory of definite and indefinite reference, and uses this theory to explain the ungrammaticality of numerous sequences of article + noun-modifier (e.g. *the (*a) wisest king was Pharaoh*; *Fred bought the (*a) bigger dog of the two*; *I remembered the (*a) sweet little child that Harry used to be*). Wherever the referential meaning of the noun modifier is semantically opposed to that of the article, an ungrammaticality arises. Grammaticality facts are therefore used as corroborative evidence for the proposed theory of definite and indefinite reference.

At the same time these article ungrammaticalities provide suggestive data for the construction of an overall theory of the role of semantics in grammaticality prediction. A generalisation is proposed which unites semantic with syntactic causes of ungrammaticality. It is because such a semantic-syntactic generalisation exists that we can understand why both semantic and syntactic facts must be incorporated in the rules which predict all and only the grammatical sentences of a language. At a more general theoretical level, this book is therefore intended as a contribution to an improved understanding of the relationship between semantics and syntax.

The PhD thesis upon which this book is based was completed in October 1974 after a four-year period of graduate study at the University of Cambridge, from 1970 to 1974. The PhD degree was awarded in April 1975 after an oral examination in January 1975. Most of the revisions were made during the latter months of 1976 and the early months of 1977 while I was a visiting professor in the Department of Linguistics at the University of California, Los Angeles. I would like to express my special appreciation to the Department of Linguistics at UCLA for putting the time and resources at my disposal which enabled me to revise my thesis for publication, and for providing the kind of invigorating environment which makes such work meaningful and worthwhile. I would also like to thank the University of Essex, England, for granting me leave of absence during this period. The final revisions were completed in the latter months of 1977 during

my first semester as an assistant professor in the Department of Linguistics, University of Southern California.

In reworking the PhD thesis for publication I have cut down on the presentation of background literature in the introductory chapters, 1 and 2, but I have also made a number of additions. The chapter on definiteness (chapter 3) remains much as it was, but the chapter on indefiniteness (chapter 4) and the discussion of syntactic and semantic causes of ungrammaticality (chapter 2) have been expanded, and are now more thorough and complete. I believe that my semantic explanation for the article + noun-modifier ungrammaticalities (presented in chapter 5) and my theoretical conclusions based on this explanation (chapter 6) are more convincing as a result. The purpose of the revisions has therefore been to provide additional evidence and justification for the general theory presented in the PhD thesis, rather than to change the nature of that theory. The overall theoretical thrust of the book remains as it was in the PhD thesis: to argue for the fundamental role of semantic considerations in predicting all and only the grammatical sentences of a language.

There are a number of people who I would like to acknowledge for their help in commenting on and encouraging the research which is presented in this book. These include, at the University of Cambridge, particularly John Trim, and also Terry Moore and Bernard Comrie. During my Cambridge period I benefited considerably from the work and lectures of Pieter Seuren (now at the University of Nijmegen, Holland). The Department of Linguistics at Cambridge as a whole was a most stimulating environment in which to write a thesis. I would like to thank Gerald Gazdar and John Lyons (both of the University of Sussex) for their comments, and also Martin Atkinson and David Kilby (University of Essex) and Ruth Kempson (School of Oriental and African Studies, London). At UCLA I am particularly grateful to Bob Stockwell, Ed Keenan and Sandy Thompson for their considerable help, ideas and encouragement. I have also benefited from discussions with Elinor Keenan and Jim Heringer (University of Southern California) and from correspondence with Dwight Bolinger.

This book is dedicated to my parents, Eric and Ellen Hawkins. Without a doubt they have had the profoundest influence of all, albeit indirect, on its contents. Any piece of research or thinking such as this is a unique product of the mind which creates it. I feel at peace with the mind which nature and nurture have given me, and I wish to recognise my indebtedness to them in the form of this book.

INTRODUCTION

The Background of Research

The definite and indefinite articles have been studied by scholars from many different backgrounds and perspectives. Traditional grammarians, philologists, structuralist and transformational syntacticians, philosophers and logicians have all contributed to the currently available data and descriptive insights.

The traditional studies which I have found the most valuable are Christopherson (1939) and Jespersen (1949), which is based on Christopherson's work. Using a large corpus of written English these authors provide an insightful classification of the many usage possibilities of the definite and indefinite articles. Although Christopherson's general theory is too restrictive (cf. chapter 3, section 2), a close reading of his book gives one a very rich sense of the meaning and functions of the English articles.

Philologists such as Heinrichs (1954) and Hodler (1954) are concerned with the historical evolution of the meanings and functions of the articles in the modern Germanic languages. The older Germanic languages did not have a definite or indefinite article, and the development of these word forms coupled with the gradual extension of their meaning and usage functions through time provides an invaluable evolutionary perspective on the linguistically significant generalisations governing usage in the modern period. The present study deals only briefly with historical questions (a separate paper is in preparation), but my generalisations for the article functions of modern English are formulated against a background study of the generalisations necessary for predicting the article functions of previous periods. In particular, my insistence on the fundamental difference between definite and demonstrative reference (cf. chapter 3, section 5) was motivated both by their contrasts in modern English, and by the vast usage differences that accompanied the historical evolution of the definite article from an unstressed demonstrative.

I have benefited also from Yotsukura's (1970) structuralist study of the articles. Yotsukura collects a large corpus of written English and lists the sequences of article + noun-modifier which occur in her corpus only with the definite, or with the indefinite article, but not with both. Some of the co-occurrence restrictions for which I propose a semantic

explanation come from Yotsukura's classification. Some others come from transformational studies by Carlota Smith (1969) and Higham (1972). All these studies are to be credited with the discovery of grammaticality data which went largely unnoticed in the traditional literature of Christopherson and Jespersen. Many additional co-occurrence restrictions I discovered myself in the course of testing my semantic explanation, which I first formulated in order to account for the co-occurrence restrictions available in the literature.

The study of definite descriptions has played an important role in philosophy and logic. Fundamental semantic insights developed by philosophers and logicians include: the uniqueness of definite descriptions (cf. Russell (1905)); the notion of presupposition (cf. Frege (1892) and Strawson (1950), (1952) and (1964)); and reference as a form of speech act (cf. Searle (1969)). All these theories are summarised in chapter 3, section 2.

Goals of the Present Study

The most important goal of the present study, in the light of this background of research, is to develop a unified theory of definiteness and indefiniteness, and to consider the consequences of this theory for the theory of grammar as a whole. The major studies of the articles to date have been compartmentalised, each concentrating on certain portions of data, and there has been little cross-reference. While logicians stress the uniqueness of definite descriptions, speech act theorists and traditional grammarians concentrate on the various pragmatic assumptions which the speaker makes about the hearer's knowledge or about the situation of utterance when using a definite article. But neither camp considers their generalisations of meaning in relation to the syntactic behaviour of the articles, as studied by the structuralist and the transformationalist. Nor is there any theory which unites logical and pragmatic aspects of meaning. Why should one and the same morpheme, say the definite article, combine these two aspects of meaning, logical and pragmatic, and what is the relationship between them? Conversely, transformationalists propose formal devices of various kinds for blocking co-occurrences of articles and noun-modifiers without generally exploring the possibility that there might be an explanation along semantic lines for many of them.

The student of definiteness and indefiniteness is therefore confronted at the outset by three sets of, apparently quite independent, linguistic generalisations: generalisations of meaning having to do with truth and falsity conditions; pragmatic generalisations of meaning

involving appropriate usage; and syntactic generalisations involving the grammaticality of one or other article (but not both) in various syntactic frames. Almost inevitably, higher level generalisations have been missed.

There is at the same time an absence of significant generalisations even within these areas of specialisation. For example, the uniqueness of definite descriptions holds only for singular count nouns and does not generalise to the equally common plural and mass nouns with the definite article. And the various usage possibilities of the definite article are often accompanied by pragmatic generalisations which predict only a small fraction of the attested uses.

In this book I hope to convince the reader that there do exist higher level descriptive generalisations both within and across these hitherto separate areas. In particular I hope to show that differences in truth conditions between definite and indefinite articles are often a natural consequence of pragmatic (speech act) differences between them, and that a large number of article ungrammaticalities are in turn directly explainable in terms of the logical and pragmatic meanings of the articles. In order to sustain this semantic explanation for ungrammaticality I shall have to demonstrate both the absence of a syntactic explanation, and also the general validity of invoking semantic explanations in syntax. This is the purpose of the first two chapters. I shall also have to demonstrate that the meaning contrast between the definite and indefinite articles is such that grammaticality differences involving articles do indeed follow naturally from the semantic differences, given independently established general causes of ungrammaticality. Some general causes of ungrammaticality are therefore explored in chapter 2. Chapters 3 and 4 analyse the meaning differences between the articles. The semantic explanation for the article ungrammaticalities can then be presented in chapter 5, and the general theoretical conclusions regarding the role of semantics in grammaticality prediction can be drawn, finally, in chapter 6.

In proposing a semantic explanation for numerous grammaticality facts involving articles I am, of course, rejecting the autonomy of syntax in this area. If my conclusions are correct, any non-semantic explanation for these grammaticality facts must be descriptively inadequate. But I do argue that purely syntactic generalisations are required in order to predict many other facts of grammaticality (cf. chapter 2). And hence, my major theoretical concern is to argue for the fundamental role of semantic alongside syntactic causes of ungrammaticality, and to propose a generalisation linking these two

types of causes, thereby explaining why both should be required in the prediction of grammaticality facts. Since I consider Transformational Generative Grammar to be the most adequate and the most developed general theory of grammar to date, I am presenting my syntactic-semantic generalisation within the general framework of that model.

At the same time I am rejecting the autonomy of logical semantics in describing the meaning of the definite and indefinite articles. To divorce logical from pragmatic aspects of meaning in an area of grammar in which both are so closely intertwined is, to my mind, descriptively artificial and explanatorily inadequate. At a descriptive level, many basic generalisations of meaning have gone unnoticed, generalisations which become readily apparent when the usage possibilities and the logical meanings of the articles are considered in conjunction with one another. Only a systematic comparison of the usage possibilities of the definite and indefinite article led me to the logical opposition between them, for which I argue in chapter 4, and which I use in explaining the ungrammaticalities of chapter 5. At an explanatory level, numerous logical differences between the articles (involving their presupposition and logical scope differences) fall naturally into place when one considers the pragmatic differences between the two.

I shall also be arguing that the many usage possibilities of definite and indefinite articles, which have hitherto been regarded as quite different from one another, can be subsumed under higher level and more abstract pragmatic generalisations.

Summary of the Book

There are six chapters in this book. It will assist the reader if I give a very brief summary of each. The first, entitled 'Meaning and Grammaticality Prediction in Generative Grammar' traces the emerging role of semantics in grammaticality prediction in Transformational Generative Grammar, as a background against which to view the proposed semantic explanation for the article + noun-modifier ungrammaticalities.

The second chapter, 'Syntactic and Semantic Causes of Ungrammaticality', explores a number of rules in transformational syntax which we label 'incompatible'. They cannot apply together to generate grammatical sentences on account of various syntactic oppositions between their respective conditions of application. For example, one rule might require the immediate juxtaposition of two constituents, another rule their non-immediate juxtaposition. Or one rule might

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