

## The Functions of (In)definiteness Markers with Proper Names

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### Abstract

Crosslinguistically, we observe various onymic functions of the definite article that hardly occur in appellatives (common nouns). Since names are inherently definite, languages can ‘play’ with the redundant overt definite articles accompanying unmodified names. They might be absent; they may be generalized to all proprial classes; they may have a classificatory function where articulated names alternate with articleless names. Thus, in Western European languages, we have an anthropocentric hierarchy ranging from highly animate, i.e., human or humanized (settlement or country) names, with a ‘zero’ article (*John, Mary; London, England*), to inanimate names, often accompanied by an overt article (*the Thames, the Highlands*). Typically, when regions become genuine states, they lose their overt article: (*the*) *Ukraine*. In such languages, a possible ‘de-humanizing’ use can spill over to personal names, as in certain Flemish dialects, where the forename *de Jan* ‘the John’ is an augmentative variant of *Jan*, just as *de Limburg* is an augmentative variant of the province name *Limburg*. If such a use becomes more frequent, as in German forenames (*der Johann*), the augmentative force is reduced to mere familiarity. This familiarity may manifest itself as a positive connotation, as in Italian *il Petrarca, la Callas*. Special forms can occur, as in Catalan *en Joan* ‘the John’. Even the indefinite article may adopt an emotive use in personal names (*A devastated Claes entered the court-room*). Additional crosslinguistic data will be provided.

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### 1. Introduction

Linguists of different theoretical persuasions have struggled with the fact that proper names occur sometimes with and sometimes without a definite article. Especially formal models of syntax that hold that nouns are headed by determiners need complex and seemingly arbitrary rules to describe and (allegedly) explain when the head of a so-called Determiner Phrase containing a proper name is spelled out. In our view, many of the problems are created by the unjustified assumption that articles always have the same function, irrespective of whether they are used with common nouns or proper names. We argue that definiteness marking is redundant with proper names, since proper names are inherently definite. Therefore, the available definiteness markers can be recuperated for marking other functions. In this paper we will describe and explain some functions of articles with proper names in terms of markedness. The presence of an article tends to be marked as opposed to its absence. Consequently, definite articles can acquire a classificatory function in that they appear with non-prototypical names. With place names, prototypicality is linked to human organisation. With personal names, the marked status of the use of definiteness markers with proper names tends to result in an augmentative connotation. The classificatory and the augmentative function of definiteness markers can both lead to a depreciatory connotation.

After discussing some preliminaries, we will remind you of the role of articles in the place name hierarchy, already presented at this forum by the first author. Then we will discuss augmentative connotations of the use of definite articles with personal proper names in European

languages. Finally, we will briefly show that our analysis, which is based on the study of European languages, makes correct predictions for non-European languages as well.

## 2. Preliminaries

Before going into the non-determinative uses of articles, we should mention a few limitations on the nominal and onymic constructions thereby involved. In article languages, there are limitations on the nature of the constructions in which articles occur with names. Names and other nominals can be used in at least three ways. The most common is the referential usage, as in the sentence *John came home late*, where we refer to the person in question in a speech act of assertion. The second is the address function, as in the vocative plus imperative pattern *Kevin, come here!* In this case, we do not refer to Kevin, but perform a speech act of attention seeking. The third function is the name-giving act, as in *I name you Mary*. Since the use of the article may be different in the three speech acts, we will limit ourselves to the referential function.

Second, it is important to note that certain modifiers may impose the presence or absence of articles. In names accompanied by modifiers, articles are obligatory in Dutch (1a), but impossible in English (1b). Sometimes they are replaced by (unstressed) demonstratives (1c, Flemish dialects), compare

- (1) a. *De liefallige Ann heeft het gemaakt.*  
       ‘\*the cute Ann has made it’  
       b. *(Our) cute Ann has made it.*  
       c. *Die (\*de) brede Rijn laat veel schepen toe.*  
       ‘that wide Rhine allows for many boats’

Therefore, our observations on article usage with bare, unmodified proper names are not necessarily valid for modified names.

Third, another limitation is that clear functions of article usage are visible almost exclusively in prototypical proper names, so we will discuss mainly personal and place names.

Finally, we distinguish between articles and proper name markers, although the latter are often called preproprial articles in the literature. Thus, the Catalan marker *en*, which optionally appears before male first names, developed from the title *Domine*. As far as we know, it never marks definiteness and it therefore seems to be mistaken to call it an article. In fact, there are languages that have a similar proper name marker, with a similar origin, in which the proper name marker can be combined with a definite article, as in Tzutujil, where the masculine proper name marker *aa* derives from a noun for ‘youth, Master’ (Dayley 1985):

- (2) Tzutujil (Mayan, Guatemala)
- |     |       |       |      |             |
|-----|-------|-------|------|-------------|
| Jar | Aa    | Xwaan | xb'e | Yab'akoj.   |
| the | youth | Juan  | went | Cuyotenango |
- ‘Juan went to Cuyotenango.’

## 3. Non-determinative usages of definiteness markers with proper names

In principle, there are at least three possibilities regarding the use of articles with proper names.

First, since proper names are inherently definite, it is possible that in certain languages with articles for common nouns, names are not marked at all, i.e., neither the prototypical classes (place and personal names), nor the more marginal classes (names of languages, brands, colours, etc.).

Second, it may be that all proprial subclasses exhibit an overt definite article. For instance, in Modern Greek the definite article has been generalized to all proper names (Holton, Mackridge and Philippaki-Warburton 2004).

Third, proper names may sometimes exhibit a definite article, sometimes not. The variation can be between onymic types or subtypes (e.g., personal names versus brand names; or settlement names versus country names) or within a type. In the first case, articles have a classificatory function. We will examine both kinds of variation, beginning with the first.

### 3.1. *Classificatory function of definite articles with proper names in European languages*

In Western European languages, there is an alternation between presence and absence of articles, depending on the type of name. This alternation has a semantic–syntactic classificatory function. The use of the alternation appears to be part of an anthropocentric cline that ranges from personal names to place names in which the human involvement is reduced to a minimum. To illustrate this, we are looking at the classificatory function of the article with personal and place names.

As for this function, the article use with prototypical names displays a general tendency to form a cline from more animate to inanimate. Personal names are undoubtedly the most prototypical names, as has been argued before by several scholars. It turns out that in languages like English, Dutch and French, first and family names do not normally display the definite article. In other words, they constitute the unmarked proprial or onymic category at the top of the hierarchy.

With respect to our anthropocentric cline, place names are very interesting. Although it is self-evident that places are not persons, the influence of humans on places shows an interesting picture of variation. This variation is reflected in a formal cline in which articles and other morphemes play a role. At the Aberdeen congress in 1996, Van Langendonck set up a place name hierarchy for English, which we think is still valid (and accepted in the literature, e.g., Anderson 2007: 115, 128, 187, 305; see also Van Langendonck and Van de Velde, to appear). We summarize the argument. In the hierarchy there is a twofold continuum: a formal paralleled by a semantic one. The formal continuum ranges from: no additional morpheme (settlement names, e.g., *London*) [unmarked] via suffix (country names, e.g., *German-y*) via definite article (names of regions, rivers, and so on, e.g., *the Thames*) to definite article + classifier, as in *the North Sea* [most marked]. This cline mirrors a semantic one, which turns out to be motivated by the anthropocentric vantage point. First, there are settlement names. As a rule, a city, town or village is a habitable place in a plain or valley, the smallest administrative unit of location, the dwelling-place, the environment with which people are most acquainted and with which the closest ties exist. Almost by definition, settlement names therefore score highest for the features ‘habitable’, ‘dwelling-place’, ‘administratively structured and bounded’ and ‘human integration’. Settlements are obviously closest to man, and so are the names for settlements to the so-called prototypical speaker. This property therefore makes settlement names into the place name category ‘par excellence’, i.e., the referentially and semantically most prototypical or least marked one (see also Anderson 2003: 365).

In names of states and countries the properties typical of settlements are present only in a secondary way. Western European languages have at their disposal a number of suffixes in order to form country names. In English, we find *-y* (*Germany*), *-land* (*Scotland*), *-ia* (*Bulgaria*), *-a* (*China*), *-(i)stan* (*Afghanistan*), and so on. The absence of human organization or administration in names of regions, fields, swamps, rivers, orientation points, mountains, forests and so on, is mirrored by the fact that they normally display an article, but no suffix, e.g., English *the Thames*, *the Highlands*, *the Marches*, *the Fens*. The names of places which score lowest on the parameters habitability, administrative organization and human integration, do not only display the article, but are often supplemented by a lexical classifier, or take a lexical classifier only, e.g., *the North Sea*, *the Sahara Desert*, *the Black Forest*, *the Big Field*.

It is now interesting to see that when regions develop into states, the article seems to disappear, at least in English and Dutch. In this way, English *the Lebanon* and Dutch *de Libanon* have become *Lebanon* and *Libanon* respectively; *the Ukraine* and *de Oekraïne* have become

*Ukraine* and *Oekraïne*; *the Sudan* and *de Sudan* have become *Sudan*. In German, which has several fixed articles in country names, there is at least one case where it disappeared. After World War II, *die Tschechei* became *Tschechien*, without the article. Apparently, the presence of the article is considered a sign of the lack of human organization and even dignity or, in extreme cases like those of *die Tschechei* and *the Ukraine*, as a sign of submission to another country. This was exactly the Ukrainian complaint of a few years ago. Likewise, when citizens of the centre of Flanders refer to the peripheral province of Limburg in a condescending way, they may still use the article (*de Limburg*). A similar phenomenon has spread to other names, e.g., names of institutions. The first Flemish broadcasting corporation put the article in front of its name, while later TV stations left it out in order to produce (unconsciously) a better image; thus, *de VRT* as against *VTM*, *Vitaya*, etc. Likewise, Flemish universities like *UFSIA* (Antwerp) take no overt article if the name occurs as an agentive subject, i.e., when it refers specifically to a human activity instead of merely to a place or building (Braecke, to appear).

### 3.2. The use of definite articles with personal proper names: augmentative function

The same augmentative connotation connected with the use of the overt article can be found with personal names in certain Flemish dialects. First, there is the optional use of the article with masculine, and sometimes, feminine forenames, as in *de Jan* ‘the John’, *de Marie* ‘the Mary’. Hartmann (1982: 196; see also Sturm 2005: 227) mentions the use of the definite article *də* in the German dialect of Mönchengladbach with an augmentative force, when the speaker is annoyed about a certain person.

Second, nicknames are augmentative by definition and are therefore often preceded by the article, e.g., *de Tromp* ‘the trunk’. The use of the overt article contrasts with the zero article in official first and family names. Obviously, the latter are taken more seriously. The term ‘augmentative’ covers a use that ranges from familiar to pejorative. In Standard German, the definite article before first names has become rather frequent, although it is still optional, e.g., *der Johann*. Consequently, it has lost much of its affective content. One could almost argue that the optionality of the article has again become classificatory in that it characterizes first names. This applies even more to most Swiss German dialects, where first names have an obligatory article (e.g., *de Peter*) while city names do not (Sturm 2005: 191, fn. 44). It seems that family names have not been affected by this development to the same extent, which can be explained by the fact that first names are more prototypical than surnames (see also Seibicke 1982).

Thus, for Germanic languages, we might propose the following minimal cline in which the classificatory use of a name as in (3A) develops into an augmentative function as in (3B):

- |     |                                   |   |  |
|-----|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| (3) | stage A (classificatory)          | → | stage B (augmentative)                     |
|     | John / Jan; Limburg vs. the Rhine | → | de Jan / der Johann ‘the John’, de Limburg |

Further research is necessary here. We observe, indeed, a remarkable contrast between Germanic and other European languages. In Ancient Greek, the definite article functioned as an honorific morpheme before personal names, as in *ho Alexandros* ‘thé Alexander’. In Romance languages, too, the affective property may manifest itself as a positive connotation, as in Italian *il Petrarca*, *la Callas*. In these languages, this use of the definite article can probably be attributed to the fact that it expresses (a positively viewed) uniqueness, which is quite compatible with the nature of names.

It proves to be hard to find published evidence for classificatory or affective uses of optional definiteness marking of proper names in non-European languages. We therefore made a detailed study of the grammatical behaviour of proper names in one language without a written tradition, viz. the Gabonese Bantu language Orungu (Van de Velde & Ambouroué, to appear). Orungu marks the difference between definite and indefinite nouns by means of tone patterns. The word

for ‘house’, for instance, is *náyó*, with two high tones, when indefinite (4a) and *náyò* with a high-low tone pattern when definite (4b):

Below, the following abbreviations are used: 9 = nominal prefix of gender 9; IX = gender 9 agreement prefix; 1SG = first person singular; DEM = demonstrative, DTP = definite tone pattern; ITP = indefinite tone pattern. Tone marking (illustrated on the vowel *a*): á = high tone; à = low tone; â = falling tone, ˆ = downstep, i.e., a functional lowering of a high tone.

- (4) a. myákóli      náyó  
           1SG.bought 9.house.ITP  
           ‘I bought a house.’
- b. myákóli      náyò  
           1SG.bought 9.house.DTP  
           ‘I bought the house.’

Some nominal modifiers, such as qualifying adjectives have a definite and an indefinite tone pattern as well.

- (5) a. náyó              mpólò  
           9.house.ITP IX.big.ITP  
           ‘a big house’
- b. náˆyó              mpòlò  
           9.house.DTP IX.big.DTP  
           ‘the big house’

In Orungu most proper names are transparently derived from common nouns or phrases. Proper names keep the tone pattern of the noun from which they are derived. When they are derived from an indefinite noun, they have a tone pattern typical for indefinite nouns and when they are derived from a definite common noun, they have a “definite” tone pattern. What sets them apart from common nouns is that, since they are inherently definite, names do not have a tonally marked opposition between definite and indefinite.

- |     |                                   |  |
|-----|-----------------------------------|--|
| (6) | <i>Personal proper name</i>       | <i>Common noun source</i>                        |
|     | kòlò (unisex)                     | kòlò ‘an evening’ (versus kólò ‘the evening’)    |
|     | ìwèngà (fem.)                     | ìwèngà ‘a choir’ (versus ìwéngà ‘the choir’)     |
|     | òzúngè (masc.)                    | òzúngè ‘the saviour’ (versus òzùngè ‘a saviour’) |
|     | <i>Nickname</i>                   |  |
|     | èbòkólò                           | èbòkólò ‘a jar’ (versus èbóˆkólò ‘the jar’)      |
|     | (for a woman with large buttocks) |  |
|     | <i>Village name</i>               |  |
|     | ìsàsà                             | ìsàsà ‘ferns’ (versus ìsásà ‘the ferns’)         |

The question that is of interest here is whether the tonal marking of (in)definiteness is recuperated to mark other functions of proper names. It turns out that this is the case. First, proper names that have an inherently indefinite tone pattern receive a depreciatory interpretation when used with a definite tone pattern. In that case they have to be accompanied by a non-restrictive demonstrative.

- (7) òkéro woman’s name < ‘a part’ (gender / noun class 3)
- òkéro      yínó      (kê)  
 Okero.DTP    IX.DEM    (also)

‘Really, Okero here’ (depreciatory)

It is truly the depreciatory connotation that causes the definite tone pattern, not the presence of a non-restrictive demonstrative, because the latter can accompany the same proper name with its usual “indefinite” tone pattern.

Second, when proper names are modified by a qualifying adjective (again, non-restrictively), the adjective has a definite tone pattern, due to the inherent definiteness of the name.

(8) *Igouwè* men’s or women’s name (etymology unknown, gender 5)

- a. ìyùwé        mbyà  
    Igouwè.ITP IX.beautiful.DTP  
    ‘the beautiful Igouwè’
- b. ìyùwé        mpòlò  
    Igouwè.ITP IX.fat.DTP  
    ‘the fat Igouwè’

However, the adjective can take an indefinite tone pattern, in which case it is interpreted ironically or sarcastically as the opposite of its literal meaning. This option is unavailable with common nouns, where the combination of a definite noun with an indefinite adjective is simply ungrammatical.

- (9) a. ìyùwè        mbyá  
       Igouwè.ITP IX.beautiful.ITP  
       ‘the “beautiful” Igouwè’
- b. ìyùwè        mpóló  
       Igouwè.ITP IX.fat.ITP  
       ‘the “fat” Igouwè’

#### 4. Conclusions

In most Western European languages, there is an alternation between presence and absence of definite articles with proper names. When an article is present, it does not have the same function as an article used with a common noun. Rather, definite articles have a classificatory function and/or an emotive value with proper names. We can predict that the same is true for non-European languages. This prediction turned out to be correct for the Bantu language Orungu, but more detailed analyses of this phenomenon in languages without a written tradition will be needed in order to prove its universal validity.

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