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The Definite Article Regarded as Marker of Accessibility between Mental Spaces

Árpád KÉMENES

Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania
Department of Humanities
kemenesarpad@sapientia.siculorum.ro

Abstract. Studies on articles mainly highlight two roles of the definite article: marking familiarity and unique identifiability. Basing on Fauconnier's mental space theory, Epstein argues that for a full interpretation of a noun phrase premodified by a definite article, some additional information is needed, beyond what is conveyed by the noun phrase itself. The definite article signals that the knowledge required for interpreting the noun phrase is accessible somewhere in the network of mental spaces. The present paper focuses on the way connections between mental spaces are constructed when an entity enters the discourse in the opening paragraphs of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, as well as on the role the definite article plays in this process.

Keywords: mental spaces, accessibility, discourse

1. Introduction

There has been much debate on the role of the definite article in English; yet, as Abbott (2004) points out, most of the studies fail to cover all uses of this part of speech. This is so owing to the fact that a large number of studies focus mainly on two roles of the definite article, namely: marking unique identifiability and familiarity. Basing on the accessibility theory worked out by Ariel (1990) and the mental space theory launched by Fauconnier (1994), Epstein (2002) comes up with an account of some hitherto less thoroughly analysed uses of the definite article.

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Epstein approaches this problem under a discourse-based framework, which provides a basis for a unified account of all uses of this part of speech. Following Ariel and Fauconnier's claim that grammatical elements are in fact discourse processing instructions (as Fauconnier puts it: "language does not carry meaning, it guides it"), he views the definite article as a "grammatical signal contributing to both the construction and retrieval of mental entities" (Epstein 2002). He argues that the definite article always marks the accessibility of a discourse referent.

In this theoretical framework the term "accessibility" refers to the degree of activation of information in long or short-term memory. There are four factors mentioned by Ariel (1990) that affect accessibility: recency of mention, saliency, competition and unity. Epstein posits that the basic meaning of the article is "to signal the addressee the availability of an access path". That is, the knowledge required for interpreting an NP is accessible somewhere in the network of mental spaces. Thus, for a full interpretation of NPs pre-modified by the definite article, one has to look for additional information, beyond that conveyed by the NP itself. This highly context-sensitive information stems from a common knowledge "ranging from textual to cultural, from specific to general" (Epstein 2002). The interpretation of constituents made up of the definite article and a NP involves the establishment of connections between the discourse entity set up by the NP and other less highly activated assumptions. The definite article is in fact an instruction for the listener to construct a path (i.e. a set of cognitive links between knowledge in multiple spaces), but it does not provide any information on the exact connections that should be constructed when interpreting individual definite NPs. The space-configuration can be determined only if the NP is analysed within its broader context. Thus, the definite article underspecifies the path between the network of mental spaces, which makes possible the construction of different space-configurations by different addressees.

2. Connections between mental spaces and the role of the article in the opening paragraphs of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

The introductory paragraphs in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* are particularly suitable for the exemplification of the way connections between mental spaces are constructed when an entity first enters the discourse, and the role the definite article plays in this process.

A less typical use of *the* is encountered in the very first paragraph:

(1) The *Nellie*, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. (p. 1958)[1]

[1] The page numbers refer to *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 2.

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The referent of the first definite NP is portrayed as accessible, although, being the first sentence of the text, it obviously introduces new information. As the NP pre-modified by the definite article is followed by an indefinite appositional NP, this leads us to the conclusion that the readers are not presupposed to be familiar with the referent of the proper noun. What the use of the definite article triggers from the background knowledge is that 'Nellie' does not denote a person, but rather a value of some other role. This vague presupposition needs further specification, which is provided by the apposition. Once the role has been clarified, more items of information become accessible from one's background knowledge about cruising yawls. This knowledge is applied to by the writer when he introduces the second definite NP into the discourse: 'the sails'.

The definite article signals the accessibility of background knowledge in the second quotation, as well:

(2) The water shone pacifically; the sky, without a speck, was a benign immensity of unstained light; the very mist on the Essex marshes was like a gauzy and radiant fabric, hung from the wooded rises inland, and draping the low shores in diaphanous folds. (ibid.)

The next quotation, however, is a description of the Thames estuary from a different point of view. The change in viewpoint is reflected by the use of indefinite NPs.

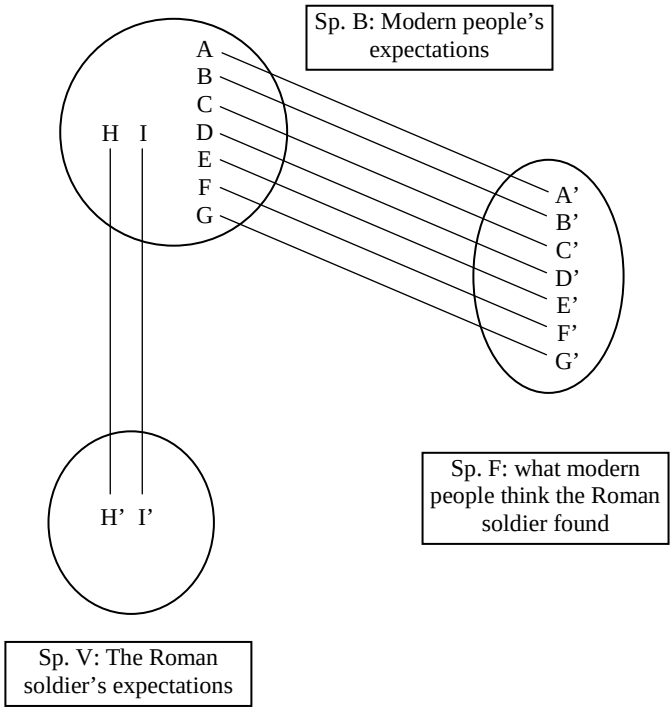
(3) Imagine him here – the very end of the world, a sea the colour of lead, a sky the colour of smoke, a kind of ship about as rigid as a concertina – and going up this river with stores, or orders, or what you like. Sandbanks, marshes, forests, savages – precious little to eat fit for a civilised man, nothing but Thames water to drink. (p. 1960)

Two different instances of stereotypical knowledge are confronted here: on the one hand, we have the modern people's knowledge of what one can expect when arriving at the Thames estuary, its surroundings and environmental changes during the history (which forms the Base Space and serves as a starting point for the further development of the lattice of mental spaces) and, on the other hand, there is another mental space, the Viewpoint Space, which is made up of the Roman soldier's expectations on what he will find in Britain. The third space, the Focus Space (i. e. the structure that is currently being added) contains elements that modern people believe the Roman soldier encountered when he arrived at the mouth of the river.

Focus Space (space F) is directly accessible from the Base Space (space B), which is the general configuration of the network of mental spaces in the second

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quotation, too, where the Base coincides with the Viewpoint Space, and the accessibility of Focus Space from Viewpoint Space is signalled by the definite article. In the third quotation, however, a separate Viewpoint Space has been created from which to access Focus Space. Although, analysing these mental spaces from a broader perspective, the Base Space and the Viewpoint Space do have a number of counterparts (not explicitly stated in the text), there are no elements that can be projected from Viewpoint Space (V-space) onto the Focus-Space. The lack of accessibility is signalled by the use of indefinite NPs. The switch from definiteness to indefiniteness (i.e. from accessibility to lack of accessibility) denotes a change in viewpoint as well (see figure 1).



The first mention of the word *darkness* in the body of the text is also worth discussing.

(4) They must have been dying like flies here. Oh yes – he did it. Did it very well, too, no doubt, and without thinking much about it either, except

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afterwards to brag of what he had gone through in this time, perhaps. They were men enough to face the darkness. (p. 1960)

It can be argued that the definite article refers back to the title. Nevertheless, another approach is also possible. As Epstein (2002) points out, the article might trigger the interpretation according to which the discourse entity pre-modified by *the* is highly prominent; in other words, it is going to play an important role in the broader discourse context.

The second mention of this discourse entity appears with the indefinite article:

(5) But these chaps were not much account, really. They were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force – nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind – as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. (p. 1961)

The indefinite article here, too, has the role of a space-marker. As uncountable nouns are not usually preceded by the indefinite article, when they are, the indefinite article signals that the noun refers to a role that has several values (on a par with the NP *a cruising yawl* in the first quotation). According to this interpretation, there are several kinds of darkness, such as the one encountered by the Roman soldier or the one that is described in the main part of the story. However, there are different degrees of typicality (Kiefer 1999), which accounts for the use of Darkness, written in a capitalised form in quotation (6).

(6) She seemed to know all about them and about me too. An eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful. Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. *Ave!* Old knitter of black wool. *Morituri te salutant.* Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again – not half, by a long way. (p. 1964)

The capitalised form of *Darkness* in the quotation is equivalent to a NP preceded by the stressed form of the definite article. Therefore, it does not denote a role – as it would if it were printed in small letters. It rather refers to the most

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typical instantiation, the prototype of *darkness* – at least according to Marlow's point of view.

The example presented above differs from those referred to by Epstein (2004) when discussing about "roles". According to Epstein the occurrences of definite NPs "indicate that a referent is being entered into the discourse as a role". However, in my opinion the difference between definite and indefinite NPs that bring roles into the discourse is that the indefinite NP signals that information on the values of the role can be expected in the discourse, while no such information is expected when the role is marked by a definite NP. That is, when a role is brought into the discourse by means of an indefinite NP, the lattice of mental spaces is usually further developed through the value(s) of that role. However, when the role is instantiated through a definite NP, the Focus Space can be accessed directly, without any reference to values.

3. Conclusion

As the examples above show, the indefinite NP functions as a signal to the listener about the blocking of direct accessibility between two mental spaces. For an adequate interpretation, Focus Space has to be accessed through a third space, which is not indispensable in the case of definite NPs.

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