

Definiteness, Indefiniteness, and Anaphoric Relations in English

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1 Introduction

In this article, I argue that the basic properties of the definite and the indefinite article in English are extended to the stylistic properties of contexts in which definite and indefinite noun phrases are used as anaphoric devices. Specifically, I discuss two types of anaphoric noun phrases (NPs for short); first, definite NPs in anaphoric use, as in (1), and second, indefinite NPs in anaphoric use, as in (2):

- (1) ... Illinois state senator Barack Obama, 43, transfixed a nationwide audience with his ... speech at the Democratic National Convention. In a dismal year for Democrats, the Hawaiian-born son of a black Kenyan father and a white woman from Kansas was a singular sensation. Post-convention cachet and unrelenting charisma helped the married father of two win his bid for a U.S. Senate seat by a three-to-one margin; ... So impressive were Obama's "politics of hope" that party leaders began speculating about a future presidential run long before the Harvard Law graduate's first day on Capitol Hill.

People Yearbook 2005, p.23.

- (2) S.-Y. Kuroda has illuminated a great many aspects of the study of language in his fascinating and wide-ranging contributions. This collection of essays ... is a fitting tribute to the work of an outstanding scholar.

Interdisciplinary Approaches to Language: Essays in Honor of S.-Y. Kuroda, 1992, Backcover.

In (1), the underlined definite NPs are anaphoric to Barack Obama, and in (2), the underlined indefinite NP is anaphoric to S.-Y. Kuroda. Both definites and indefinites can be used anaphorically, but the styles of anaphoric reference are different.

In English, pronouns are specifically used as anaphoric devices, so in (1), *he* can replace the definite NP to make anaphoric reference to Barack Obama, as in (1')

(1') ... Illinois state senator Barack Obama, 43, transfixed a nationwide audience with his ... speech at the Democratic National Convention. In a dismal year for Democrats, he was a singular sensation.

However, anaphoric definites are more informative than anaphoric pronouns, because the former can describe discourse referents in a way the latter cannot.

In view of these examples, I would like to address two related questions.

- i. On what basis do you decide the appropriate form of the anaphoric device that you use in the context you are to create?
- ii. As for anaphoric reference, how definite and indefinite noun phrases differ stylistically from simple pronouns such as *he*?

I would like to answer these questions in light of the relation between style and the basic properties of the definite and indefinite articles. It should be noted at the outset that here I refer back to the speaker as *he*, and to the addressee as *she*.

2 Stylistic Properties of Anaphoric Definites

We begin by discussing anaphoric definites such as those in (1). They are mainly used in journalistic articles on famous people. Typically, their descriptions are changed repeatedly in reference to one person: in (1), Barack Obama is referred to in three different ways. Similar examples are abundant. In (3), too, Ichiro is referred back to with three different descriptions.

(3) Ichiro is closing in on a contract extension with Seattle ... The Seattle Times reported ... Tuesday that the extension could pay the two-time AL batting champion and 2001 AL MVP close to \$100 million over five years. The 33-year-old outfielder is in the final year of a \$41 million, four-year contract. The seven-time All-Star said during spring training that he planned to test his value on the free-agent market this winter.

The Asahi Shimbun, Thursday, July 12, 2007, p.26, Sports.

These definites are what Maes (1996) calls “definite alternative nominal anaphors”. They serve two functions: first, like pronouns, they are used to keep identifying the discourse referent which has been identified in the preceding context; second, unlike pronouns, they serve to describe or qualify that referent, providing a description which is alternative to the one

given in the preceding context.¹

In discussing anaphoric relations in discourse, Bolinger (1979: 291-292) argues that repeated nouns such as *sulfur* in (4), but not anaphoric pronouns such as *it*, serve to emphasize the quality of discourse referents.

(4) You don't need sulfur for drying apricots; {sulfur/ it} ruins the flavor.

Bolinger (p. 292) notes that repeated nouns "seem to be underlyingly demonstrative rather than simply definite", saying that *sulfur* in (4) means 'that substance'.

However, anaphoric definites differ from repeated nouns in that they offer a different way to describe the discourse referent in question. Epstein (2001: 340) points out that definites are unnatural as anaphoric devices when they merely repeat the same content as given in the immediate antecedent. For example:

(5) There's a cat in the yard. It's eating a mouse./ #The cat is eating a mouse.

In terms of information structure (cf. Prince (1992)), anaphoric devices represent discourse-old information, for they are used to refer back to what has already been introduced in the previous part of the discourse. However, the contrast in (5) as well as examples (1) and (3) shows that definites, but not pronouns, are used to add something new to anaphoric reference.

Gundel et al. (1993: 282-283) refer to example (6) to argue that definites, but not pronouns, can be used when the addressee has to infer the missing antecedent referent to which an anaphoric device is used to refer back.

(6) I dropped ten marbles and found only nine of them. The missing marble's probably under the sofa./ #It's probably under the sofa.

In this case, the first sentence does not have an explicit discourse referent for the anaphoric device in the second sentence. You have to set up an appropriate antecedent 'one missing marble' by subtracting nine from ten. Indirect anaphoric reference of this type is achieved by definite NPs, but not by pronouns, for pronouns are best used when they are there only to help identify a discourse referent that can be directly identified from the preceding context.

These examples show that anaphoric definites are suited when you add some kind of

change to the antecedent referent, and that they are well suited for giving your addressee a new access path to your intended referent.

Having clarified the basic properties of anaphoric reference in terms of definite NPs, we are now in a position to discuss where these properties come from.

Adapting Ariel's (1990) idea of 'accessibility', Epstein (2001) argues that the basic meaning of the English definite article is the low accessibility on the part of the addressee: the referent of a definite NP is available for her to construct or retrieve from memory, but is not close to her center of attention.

This meaning is realized by a journalistic context such as (1) where the speaker uses definites to imply not only that the addressee can easily obtain an access path to their referent, but also that that referent is not so close to her that he is ready to give it different descriptions, and to offer her more access paths to it. This second implication distinguishes anaphoric definites from anaphoric pronouns.

When you use pronouns such as *he* for anaphoric reference, you assume that your addressee too is familiar with the antecedent referent. Since she is familiar with the referent, you don't have to give her another access path to it.

When you use definites such as *the married father of two* for anaphoric reference, on the other hand, you assume that your addressee is not familiar enough with the antecedent referent. When you keep using such definites for the same discourse referent, you can keep her attention to it: definites of this type serve to keep her distant from it, thereby inviting her to think, "I still don't know much about your topic, and so I want to know more about it".

This applies to the situation where journalists write about famous people, assuming that their readers want to know more about the people they write about. It is a natural choice for journalists to use definites for anaphoric reference, because they are fitted for the interests of the reader who is willing to know about famous people from different points of view.

This use of anaphoric definites produces what Fowler and Fowler (1931) calls "elegant variation". To borrow a phrase from Leech and Short (1981: 107), definites used in this way serve to "build up a many-sided picture" of the discourse referent. Clearly, this effect is based on the multiple access paths provided by anaphoric definites, which in turn comes from the low accessibility meant by the definite article.

3 Stylistic Properties of Anaphoric Indefinites

Our next concern is with anaphoric indefinites such as the one in (2). Ushie (1986) notes that anaphoric indefinites occur in the context that provides an interpretation, rather

than a simple presentation, of the situation described. Ushie (1986: 432-433) illustrates this point with the following context:

- (7) ... By the time he was 19 he (Malcolm) was doing a bit of social drinking and had acquired the chain-smoking habit Then one day Malcolm's wealthy uncle came out to visit from New Hampshire. Uncle Daniel drank nothing but the purest of water and had some strong ideas about people who didn't believe as he did.

This context is to be followed by the following four continuation options. While the first two contexts accept anaphoric indefinites, the second two do not:

- (A) He was shocked to find {a 19-year-old boy/Malcolm} smoking and drinking....
(B) The fact that {a 19-year-old boy/Malcolm} was smoking and drinking shocked him
(C) Upon arriving, he found {*a 19-year-old boy/Malcolm} smoking and drinking, and he was shocked
(D) When he found {*a 19-year-old boy/Malcolm} smoking and drinking, he was shocked

These examples show that anaphoric indefinites occur in the context that offers the cause or reason of the situation described. In (A) and (B), the indefinite *a 19-year-old boy* is as acceptable as *Malcolm*, and it is used to provide us with the reason why Uncle Daniel was shocked at Malcolm. Indefinites of this type are unnatural in (C) and (D), because these are embedded in the sentences that present the temporal sequence rather than the cause of his shock.

Now we need to consider why anaphoric indefinites have such constraints on the context in which they can be used appropriately. We also need to consider why anaphoric devices are made from indefinite singulars when they can or should be made from other definite expressions. I suggest that indefinite NPs in predicative use are the key to answering these questions.

Rouchota (1994) argues that the predicative use is the prototypical use of indefinites of the form *a N*. While other uses of indefinites such as the specific use and the generic use arise from different interpretations of context, it is least influenced by context: it is determined

at sentence-level. Combined with copula *be*, predicative indefinite NPs denote properties attributed to the referent of the subject of a copular sentence such as *John is a teacher*.

Ushie's point follows from the two levels of metonymy based on the predicative use. When combined with the context that describes parts and aspects of an identifiable discourse referent such as S.-Y. Kuroda in (2), indefinites assimilate to the predicative use, and denote its properties. The speaker uses indefinites to denote properties such as "an outstanding scholar", allowing them to represent the referent having those properties and also a class of which it is a member. With this type of metonymic reference, he helps the addressee interpret the referent showing a particular property in the situation described as being typical of the class whose members share that property.

It is not that indefinites have an anaphoric function by themselves. Rather, the anaphoric reference associated with indefinites is a by-product of the fact that indefinites denote properties. Typically, anaphoric indefinites occur in the following context: First, you introduce an identifiable referent into the discourse. Second, you describe parts and aspects of that referent. Third, you mention one of its properties in terms of an indefinite NP. Since properties are understood in terms of what they are attributed to, it is a natural inference on the part of the addressee that the property denoted by the indefinite NP in this context is a description of the referent mentioned just before. In this way, addressees can infer an anaphoric relation from indefinites, which is expected by the speaker.

Since anaphoric indefinites occur in the context that describe parts of the topic discourse referent, their head nouns are naturally filled by those that describe parts of human beings, such as *mind, soul, spirit*, as in (8), (9) and (10):

- (8) ... *A Cry of Stone* is the fictional account of the life of ... Rose Wâbos. Abandoned as an infant, Rose is raised by her grandmother ... in the remotest regions of the northern Ontario wilderness. The story covers a period from 1940 to 1973, chronicling Rose's growth to womanhood, her discovery of art, her moving out into the world of cities and sophisticated cultural circles. Above all it is the story of a soul who is granted little of human strengths and resources, yet who strives to love in all circumstances.

[<http://www.amazon.com/Cry-Stone-Michael-D-OBrien/dp/0898708508>]

With *a soul who ...* in (8), it is implied that what is described about Rose Wâbos is not specific to her, but rather generalizes to the class of people, each member of which has a soul who is

granted little of human strengths and resources, yet who strives to love in all circumstances. Definite expressions, by contrast, can only make anaphoric devices that exclusively refer back to their antecedents, and that they lack the generalization effects that are associated with anaphoric indefinites such as the one in (8). In other words, anaphoric definites do not describe the discourse referent as one member of a class in the way anaphoric indefinites.

In (9), the underlined indefinite NP is used to show that contributions by design experts to this portrait are generally affirmed because of the property expressed by this NP:

- (9) Ingo Maurer has been illuminating lives since 1966, when he designed his first light fixture for an installation at the Herman Miller showroom in Munich ... His work has been exhibited in countless museums ... Arranged thematically, this dazzling retrospective brings together an extensive ... selection of Maurer's lamps and lighting systems. Contributions by design experts ... round out this portrait of a creative mind who continues to push the boundaries of lighting design.

[<http://www.vuboeckhandel.nl/app/suartik2.p?session=pgkepickofajekwpagplwjjjYIfZjcod&atgnr=13206359>]

Similarly, the underlined indefinite in (10) describes Jenna Bush from a generalized point of view, giving us an interpretation which explains why the day marked a transition for her.

- (10) Jenna Bush and her twin, Barbara, started work this week at Bush-Cheney campaign headquarters in Arlington, six weeks after the 22-year-olds celebrated their college graduations. Jenna Bush made her campaign debut by coming along for a day of bus riding across the Philadelphia exurbs... The day marked a transition for Jenna Bush, a political coming-out for a free spirit who has mostly shunned official publicity.

[http://environmentalrepublican.blogspot.com/2004_07_01_archive.html]

In these examples, *soul*, *mind*, and *spirit* are all used to stand for people, but each describes different aspects of human activities: *soul* focuses on the part of a person that is responsible for feelings and emotions; *mind* on the part of a person that is responsible for thinking and creation; and *spirit* on the part that forms how a person thinks, feels and behaves. Choice among these nouns reflects which part of a person is described in the context in question.²

4 Concluding Remarks

We are now in a position to summarize the arguments. Choice among these anaphoric device options depends on the style in which the speaker is to use an anaphoric device. First, pronouns are fitted for the style in which the speaker's second and subsequent mentions of the discourse referent fall within the same frame as his first mention of it: anaphoric reference in terms of pronouns is fitted for a style in which he adds little change to the nature of the discourse referent in the discourse flow.

Second, definite NPs are fitted for the style in which the speaker talks about a discourse referent from different points of view. Each time he mentions it with a different description, he can renew the addressee's access path to it, thereby bringing it up to her focus of attention. This style of anaphoric reference is based on the low accessibility of the definite article.

Third, anaphoric reference in terms of indefinite NPs is fitted for a style in which the speaker describes parts and aspects of an identifiable discourse referent. In this style, he uses an indefinite NP to give his reason to talk about the discourse referent, suggesting that the reason can be generalized to other cases, each of which has the same property as that referent. This style of describing a discourse referent comes into completion when the speaker determines an anaphoric NP by the indefinite article, assimilating it to a predicative NP that expresses a property of the referent identified in the preceding context.

I conclude that the two anaphoric styles, as in (1) and (2), exploit the basic properties of the definite and the indefinite articles.

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Notes

1 The anaphoric definite NPs that I discuss in this article are different from anaphoric epithets such as *the bastard* in (i):

- (i) Then I got gas and drove Tommy home. The bastard didn't even bother to offer anything when I got there.

[<http://cabbiegirl.blogspot.com/2004/08/i-love-sundays.html>]

It is characteristic of anaphoric epithets that their head nouns are occupied by what Bolinger (1972) calls “degree nouns”, such as *angel*, *bastard*, *fool* and *idiot*. They are used to show the evaluation of a discourse referent from the speaker’s point of view.

Also excluded from consideration are what Skirl (2007) calls “metaphorical anaphors”. The example in (ii) is cited from Skirl (2007: 103), where the underlined definite NP in the second sentence metaphorically describes as well as refers back to the discourse referent introduced by the first sentence:

- (ii) A man lies on the sofa. The elephant is probably dreaming.

Here I focus on anaphoric NPs whose head nouns are neither evaluative nor metaphorical, but are objective descriptions. Readers are referred to Nishida (2002, 2005) for details of anaphoric epithets. It should be added that metaphorical anaphors merit further study.

2 It is a complex matter to list up the conditions under which indefinite NPs are used anaphorically. The anaphoric indefinites that I discuss in this article are different from, but are related to, what Prince (1992) calls the “inferable” use of indefinites. The following example is taken from Prince (1992: 306):

- (i) I picked up that book I bought and a page fell out.

Like the indefinite NPs in this section, *a page* in the second clause refers back to a part of the book mentioned in the first clause. Anaphoric NPs of this type are called “inferables”, because the anaphoric relation is not explicitly marked, but can be inferred. While the indefinite NP in inferable use refers to a concrete part of the referent of the antecedent, we focus on the anaphoric indefinites that refer to more abstract properties of the antecedent referent. Readers are referred to Nishida (2005) for further discussion of the relations between the two types of anaphoric indefinites.

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