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Article abstract

My core hypothesis is that the article system is directly motivated by a universal communicative problem, which is the necessity of mutual understanding. In the first place I argue, following Gardiner 1932, that a word does not mean *per se* and that a referent (Gardiner's "thing-meant") can only emerge from the agreement reached by the interlocutors in the referring process. I then suggest that articles play a key role in the process by which referents come to be shared. Their primary function is to determine the interlocutive framework within which the validating process can be achieved. Articles are thus defined as being basically markers of the role assigned to the recipient (β) in the referring process. Detailed examination of contextualized uses supports my analysis. To conclude I suggest that the distinction between different ways of reaching self and other agreement does not only structure the article system but the whole internal organization of the English language.

GRAMMAR-AND-INTERLOCUTION: ENGLISH ARTICLES AS MARKERS OF RECIPIENT ROLE

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1. Introduction: Structure and Communication

The view that talk-in-interaction rather than monological discourse is the matrix of natural language has been gaining ground over the last thirty years. Yet the ways in which interactional requirements and contingencies impinge upon grammar are still largely unexplored. Notable exceptions include Lambrecht 1994 and Schegloff 1996. One of the major theoretical concepts underlying both Lambrecht's and Schegloff's work is the notion of the "pragmatic motivation" of grammatical form. Lambrecht's analysis is based on the observation that "the structure of a sentence reflects a speaker's assumption about the hearer's state of knowledge and consciousness at the time of the utterance". He argues that this relationship between speaker assumptions about hearer and formal sentence structure is governed by rules and conventions of grammar in a component called "information structure". As to Schegloff, he explores the mutual bearing of interaction and grammar through the study of the organization of the turn-at-talk, emphasizing the need to supplement received grammar with another grammar — a "syntax-for-conversation", a grammar "retheorized for interaction" (1996: 52-133)¹.

Such positions are resonant with the view promoted by A. H. Gardiner in *The Theory of Speech and Language* (1932): conversational interaction as can be empirically observed in everyday use of speech is "the sole generator of language". Taking a radical approach, Gardiner argues that **all** linguistic forms

1 «We very likely have two enterprises before us. One is stretching an older linguistics — built for predication and writing — to cover action in interaction. But whatever stance one takes towards the linguistics which we have and which we may try (and have tried) to stretch, it seems increasingly clear that we need another, one which captures something inescapable about language for humans, one which *starts* with the domain of interaction, and gets the appropriate initial units from that domain.» (Schegloff 1996: 114).

and structures can and should be accounted for in terms of their communicative functions in discourse. Language is a “system of speech-habits” and grammar (morphology and syntax) is to be understood and explained as **entirely** (not only partially) designed for communicative purposes².

The aim of this paper is to present an account of the article system as directly motivated by a universal communicative problem — the necessity of **mutual understanding**. In the first place (Section 1), we argue, along with Gardiner’s view, that words or rather word-**meanings** are but clues to the **thing(s) meant** by the speaker. It is upon the listener that falls the duty of interpreting these clues. It follows that the referent (Gardiner’s **thing-meant**) can only emerge from the **agreement** reached by interlocutors in the referring process (Section 2). While insisting that interpretation is always context-dependent and always a matter of reasoning, Gardiner — as will be seen in Section 3 — restricts the linguist’s task to the study of **grammar-coded** communicative processes. On this basis, I will then suggest (Section 4) that articles play a key role in the process whereby referents come to be shared. Their primary function will be defined as determining the **interlocutive framework** within which the validating process can be achieved. Section 5 will be devoted to the analysis of some contextualized uses of the zero article, *a* and *the* in the conceptual framework established in section 4.

2. Listener role in the sense-making process: from “meaning” to “thing-meant”

Of central importance in Gardiner’s semantic theory is the distinction between “meaning” and “thing-meant”: “Word-meaning is, in fact, a purely philological affair. If speech is not to remain suspended in mid-air as indeed a means to an end, but without visible end, then we must recognize the existence of things for speech to refer to.” (1932: 30).

The meaning of a word must not be conceived as an “idea” in the Platonic sense but rather as a summary of each speaker’s past private experiences, as “an area upon which the various potentialities of application are plotted out.” (Gardiner 1932: 44). When the speaker utters a word, it thus comes to the listener charged with “the entire residue of all its previous applications.” (Gardiner 1932: 35). It follows that word-meanings cannot by themselves refer to just that thing the speaker has in view when using a word on a particular occasion. They can only point the listener in the right direction, only provide “well-chosen paths” leading to the thing-meant. One of the principal claims of Gardiner’s

2 For a detailed presentation of Gardiner’s views, see Douay 2000: 33-64.

book is that word-meanings are but clues to be interpreted by the listener: "I cannot insist too often upon the fact that words are only clues, that most words are ambiguous in their meaning, and that in every case the thing-meant has to be discovered in the situation by the listener's active and alert intelligence." (1932: 50).

The success of the referring act thus depends on the listener's ability to reconstruct the thing meant by the speaker:

But how do the words come by their 'meaning', as untechnical parlance has it? Obviously through a complex process of deductions by any reader capable of understanding the words. In the lack of constructive intelligence nothing could be made of them. What, apart from such interpretative intelligence, is a sequence of words? Nothing but a sum of highly complex areas of meaning indicated by a string of sounds or written symbols.

Gardiner 1932: 114

Hymes' 1981: 9 observation that language per se does not allow people to "render experience intelligible" fits in nicely with such views. To make this clear, Hymes adopts Cassirer's 1961: 113 point that "individuals do not simply share what they already possess; it is only by virtue of the sharing process that they attain what they possess, constructing a 'shared world' of meaning within the medium of language."

The "sharing process" can only be achieved through a process of reasoning based on the clues provided by word-meanings combined with clues from other sources (gesture, tone of voice, background information). Verbal and non verbal clues contribute together to the construction of an interpretive frame, "the setting in which speech can alone become effective" (1932: 49), which Gardiner calls the "situation". All the factors that help the listener to construct the interpretive frame which will enable him to understand the thing-meant or rather to make **inferences** as to the thing meant by the speaker must be included in the **situation** thus defined: "All (...) words together combine with the extra-verbal factors of speech to indicate, not the thing-meant, but its situation: the thing-meant itself is left for the intelligence of the listener to discover." (Gardiner 1932: 52).

Listener role is thus central to the sense-making process: "No use of language whatsoever is emancipated from the shackles of interpretation, (and) interpretation demands an interpreter who is the 'listener' of linguistic theory." (Gardiner 1932: 114).

Gardiner's view of the communicative process calls for investigation from many different points of view. The problem is then to determine the task of the linguistic theorist who, as pointed out by Gardiner, runs the risk of being "overwhelmed" by a "mass of information." (1932: 84).

3. Grammaticalization of recipient role

While insisting that interpretation is always context-dependent and always a matter of reasoning, Gardiner argues that neither the investigation of context nor the investigation of the inferential process itself are the business of linguists. Having no other aim than generalization and no other concern than purely linguistic matters, the linguistic theorist should restrict his field to the study of “established habits of speech”, i.e. habits of speech which have, as it were, “crystallized” into grammatical forms: “Language is only a name for established habits of speech, built out of innumerable repeated acts of the same type.” (1932: 38).

Gardiner’s focus is thus on the impact of the communicative process on the internal organization of grammar: “[Language is] a codified science built up by a myriad minds with a view to mutual understandings.” (1932: 21). A speech act involves both the achievement of “mutual understanding” (what we might call the construction of the **interlocutive** relationship) and the construction of **interpersonal** social relations. As shown by the abundant literature related to the politeness phenomena (“one of the most important and productive areas of research in pragmatics and sociolinguistics”, Preisler and Haberland 1994: 227), most studies in conversation-analytic work focus on how linguistic structure and/or rules organize interpersonal relations. As Schegloff rightly points out, the view that grammar helps organize social interaction “preserves a relatively traditional notion of grammar.” (1996: 33). As a matter of fact, most researchers working within the framework of CA simply do not address the issue of the degree to which grammar can and should be conceived as designed for communicative purposes, as “pragmatically motivated”. But if we are to meet “the challenge of talk-in-interaction” (Schegloff 1996: 114), we must accord the first purpose (the construction of what I suggested calling the interlocutive relationship) primacy as an object of inquiry.

My central tenet, then, will be that grammatical forms address the basic issue of how self and other achieve “interlocution” (mutual understanding). On this basis I will argue that while **listener** participation is crucial for the interpretation of specific situated communicative events, **recipient** role in the validating process is encoded in the language system. The claim that recipient role is grammar-coded will be examined through the study of the article system³.

3 Although, as shown above, Gardiner’s theory of interpretation and his observations on the relationship between grammar and communication have served as a springboard for my own thoughts, no such view is found in his book, where articles are described as «mere useless ballast, a habit or mannerism accepted by an entire speaking community.» (1932: 47).

But before we proceed to the exploration of the English article system along these lines, one important point has to be made regarding the terms “speaker”, “listener” and “recipient”.

As our main concern is with grammar-coded communicative processes, speaker and listener should be interpreted in reference to **roles** as opposed to “flesh and blood” individuals. This distinction is crucial for a shift of focus from the interpersonal relationship to the interlocutive relationship, and should therefore be reflected in the terminology. In the title of the present section I used the term “recipient” by contrast with “listener” so as to draw attention to this point. Similarly “sender” might be substituted for “speaker” whenever reference is being made to speaker role. Many linguists though use “recipient” and “sender” as mere equivalents of “listener” and “speaker”, so that I suggest using the Greek letters α and β whenever it will appear necessary to emphasize that reference is being made to **grammar-cued roles**. In our terminology α will thus stand for speaker role (sender) and β for listener role (recipient).

4. Articles as allocation cues

As a result of the instability of word-meaning, speaker role (α) in the referring process is to instruct recipient (β) as to how he is to recover the thing-meant (see section 2). On this basis I will argue that articles play a key role in the process by which referents come to be shared.

The article system is a three-term system. Under the analysis suggested here, *Ø/a/the* codify three distinct ways of achieving interlocutive agreement, each way defining a different **configuration** of the self and other relationship. These three configurations (which we will refer to as Configuration 0, Configuration 1 and Configuration 2, respectively) thus vary according to the role assigned to recipient (β) in the validating process. The primary function of articles is then to determine the interlocutive framework within which the validating process can be achieved⁴.

The zero article (and zero-marking in general, as seen in Douay and Roulland 1996) implies direct relationship between speaker (α) and listener (β). The abbreviation DIR will stand in our analytical framework for Direct Interlocutive Relationship. This configuration (Configuration 0) provides for **immediate agreement** on the thing or referent meant by speaker. Both participants are assumed to stand in direct relationship, so that agreement on the

⁴ The indications relating to the interlocutive framework combine with other clues (verbal and non verbal) to help the listener construct what we have called the interpretive framework (see Section 2).

thing-meant is expected to be reached immediately. In other words, zero instructs β that the thing meant by α is to be inferred from the immediate or "present"⁵ situation. In Configuration 0, the problem of the instability of word-meaning is thus solved by the (assumed) concomitant variations of α and β . A sign is proposed by α to β and immediate recovery is expected. Validation is, as it were, suspended between α and β , hence the **suspensive** value of zero mark usage in English.

In contrast with zero-marking, the use of *a* or *the* implies exiting from the configuration involving DIR. Self and other agreement can then no longer be reached immediately. The impossibility of immediate recovery by β of the referent meant by α calls into play the use of an article. The exiting from Configuration 0 can also be motivated by the speaker's desire to cancel out the element of uncertainty involved by the suspensive value of the DIR Configuration, where agreement, as seen above, is in suspense.

A (marker of Configuration 1) and *the* (marker of Configuration 2) thus both imply that we are outside the DIR framework. My claim is that the language system offers two devices for keeping sign reception under control in such a situation: either by "freezing" α variation while allowing and even requiring β variation or by "freezing" β variation.

In the configuration marked by article *a*, previous agreement is thus decreed, but only on a minimal basis, so that room is left for the listener to complete the validating process (β required to vary). In other words, Configuration 1 combines "prevalidation" (α anticipates β endorsement) and "imperfectiveness" (expectation of further development) insofar as β participation is sought. Regarding β participation, Configuration 1 is thus based on an associative pattern.

The, on the other hand, is based on a dissociative pattern. Indeed, far from seeking recipient participation, *the* imposes complete previous agreement, thus precluding listener from any intervention in the validating process (non-variation of β). In other words, β participation is cancelled out.

It follows that the agreement reached along the lines defined by the pattern of Configuration 2 is final. Hence the "conclusive" value of *the* as opposed to the non conclusive value of *a* and the suspensive value of $\emptyset$. We may diagram the system as follows:

⁵ I am referring here to the «present» defined by the DIR situation, i.e. the kind of present which, in Gardiner's words, «may be mentally imaged as a bridge connecting the speaker with his listener.» (1932: 193).

Table 1
The article system configurations of the interlocutive framework

CONFIGURATION 1	CONFIGURATION 2
<i>a</i> outside DIR	<i>the</i> outside DIR
non-variation of α /variation of β non final previous agreement partial prevalidation β intervention expected non conclusive value	variation of α /non-variation of β final previous agreement complete prevalidation β intervention precluded conclusive value
CONFIGURATION 0	
zero article DIR concomitant variations of α and β agreement in suspense no prevalidation immediate recovery by β expected suspensive value	

DIR: Direct Interlocutive Relationship

α : speaker role (sender)

β : listener role (recipient)

As the onus of discovering the referent is placed squarely on β , articles may thus be defined as being basically markers of β role in the referring process. The remainder of the present paper will be devoted to the examination of contextualized uses of the three articles.

5. Analysis of some contextualized uses

The following analysis is based on the examination of the three articles, $\emptyset$, *a* and *the*, as they are encountered in authentic contexts of use, either in oral conversational exchanges or in written texts⁶.

⁶ Any kind of discourse being addressed by a sender to a recipient, I take the view that written language is as interactive as oral conversational language (Douay 2000: 33-38).

5.1 Zero article

Examples (1) to (5) instantiate usage of Ø as it is standardly used in ordinary everyday speech, traditional grammars of English notwithstanding:

- (1) Cab's waiting outside. [speaker has called a taxi for his wife]
- (2) A: *These buns are pretty good.*
 B: *New bakery just opened up a few blocks from my place.*
 T. Clancy, *The Hunt for Red October*
 [conversational exchange between two friends]
- (3) Phone doesn't ring anymore. [interlocutors at home]
- (4) Water's cold. [interlocutors at the swimming pool]
- (5) A: *"Disinformation" is what?*
 B: *A term used by intelligence agencies. Meaning's clear enough, no?*
 Don De Lillo, *Players*

The zero article is usually explained in terms of reference to the notion presented as a continue entity as opposed to its presentation as a separate entity or unit. According to Hewson 1972: 94, English makes frequent use of zero to avoid exact or unit reference and to provide a representation "lacking in clear outline and limit":

The bare noun, calling into play as it does the great extensivity of notion belonging to the potential significate, presents the limitless, formless, continue entity; when this vague representation must be limited, reduced, clarified, defined, refined, restricted, the article comes into play.

The same word may be used as a continue-word or as a unit-word depending on the representation sought by the speaker. The emphasis on speaker role is a major step forward from earlier theories which relied on absolute categories and rules — such as those differentiating the "numerical" nouns (or "class words") which are compatible with the indefinite article from the "non-numerical" nouns (or "mass words") which are not. Yet it fails to account for examples (1) to (5) where (as is made clear by the context) the speaker does not intend to refer to a "continue" entity. In each utterance reference is being made to a neatly defined unit, which, according to the definition stated above, should call an article into play.

The only conclusion we can draw from the standard usage of zero in everyday speech, then, is that the distinction between “continue” and “unit” usage — and the often correlated distinction between the notions of generic and specific — is of no relevance whatsoever to the definition of the basic meaning of articles. Such distinctions are context-dependent, which means that they cannot be inferred by the listener on the sole basis of the clue provided by the article. Thus, Ø *water* may be used either in reference to water in a continue sense (any existing or conceivable water) as we see in example 6:

(6) Water boils at 100 degrees.

or in reference to a restricted representation — the water in which the speaker of (4) is swimming or the water you may order in a restaurant as in:

(7) Water, please.

Starting from the assumption that articles do not primarily address the problem of the mode of apprehension by the speaker of the notion but the mode of recovery by the recipient of the thing-meant, I have defined zero as the marker of the DIR Configuration (§ 4). Configuration 0, as described above, provides for immediate agreement on the thing meant by the speaker. Given this definition of zero, the English-specific usage illustrated by examples (1) to (5) appears quite straightforward and unproblematic. In each utterance the achievement of the sharing process is expected to occur immediately, in the present situation of speech. Zero coding informs β that the other clues he needs to infer the thing-meant by α are to be found in the the immediate speech setting. These clues may be found either in the external universe, as in (1) to (4), or in the previous discourse, as in (5).

In examples (3) and (4) the sharing process is expected to “go smoothly” because of the actual presence of the speaker and the listener in the same environment. In (3), for example, the fact that they are both at home is what α assumes will ensure the success of the referring process. Similarly zero in (4) instructs β that the thing meant by α is to be inferred from the present situation (in the sense defined above). If the validating process succeeds, the listener will thus receive *water* as referring to the thing most directly accessible in the immediate situation (here the water in the swimming pool).

Whether the thing-meant is to be construed as a continue or as a unit entity — or is to be interpreted in a generic or in a specific sense — depends entirely on the circumstances in which the utterance occurs. If (6) is heard in a chemistry class where the teacher is addressing her students, the listener’s power of reasoning will lead him to infer that, given the situation in which the utterance

takes place, the speaker is referring to water in a generic sense. But suppose the teacher then decides to carry out an experiment. She may ask a student to bring her water and say as in (7): *Water, please*. As explained in section 3, the problem inherent in the instability of word-meaning is to be solved, in a DIR configuration, by the concomitant variations of α and β . The function of $\emptyset$ in both *Water boils at 100 degrees* and *Water, please* is merely to indicate to β that the referring process is to be achieved in the same way in both cases (namely along the lines defined by Configuration 0), regardless of whether the representation sought by the speaker is to be construed as a continuante or unit entity, or understood in a generic or specific sense.

The following examples illustrate another frequent use of $\emptyset$ in English, namely zero-form in headlines (see note 6). The situation is different from that in (1) to (7) as the speaker (i.e. the author of the newspaper article) and the listener (here the reader of the paper) are not actually located in the same environment:

(8) Girl, ten, killed by road-sweeper

(9) Murder in Manhattan

In examples (8) and (9), $\emptyset$ is used as a means of achieving greater impact on the reader. How can such eye-catching effect be accounted for? The use of zero implying DIR, the reader is, as it were, taken to the scene of the crime, as in (9), or “called as a witness” to the accident, as in (8). But the referring process can only succeed if he reads the story under the headline. The suspensive value of the zero-mark is here exploited for rhetorical purposes. In Configuration 0, interlocutive agreement is in suspense and β is expected and required to recover the referent without further delay. The reader of the headline is thus induced to read the article so as to achieve the validating process. Because the success of the referring process depends on the reader actually reading the story announced by the headline, we might say that the effect of the zero article is to “pull him into” the story.

Zero implying DIR, it appears quite natural to leave out the article when the speaker’s goal is to suggest a close relationship with the listener. This device is often used in the opening lines of novels for creating the illusion of a background common to the narrator and the reader. In other words, α acts as if he were assuming the possibility of immediate direct agreement with β . This is brought out clearly in the following example:

- (10) *Last week, while he was passing through a crisis in his life, my Uncle Ben (B. Crader, the well-known botanist) showed me a cartoon by Charles Addams. It was an ordinary cartoon, good for a smile, but Uncle was hung up on it and wanted to discuss it elaborately.*

S. Bellow, *More Die of Heartbreak*

Articles, as hypothesized in our study, play a key role in the process by which referents come to be shared. Their function is to instruct the recipient (β) as to how he is to recover the thing(s) meant by the speaker. Arguably, it is the very process allowing the referents of “last week” and “Uncle” to be shared that creates the illusion of a shared world, i.e. the illusion of a “bridge connecting the speaker with his listener” (see note 5). Therein lies the explanation for the effect achieved by $\emptyset$ here. The use of $\emptyset$ before “Uncle” in the second sentence indicates that the reader is now assumed to be familiar enough with the narrator’s personal universe for agreement to be reached immediately, along the lines defined by the DIR Configuration. Zero thus establishes a direct intimate relationship with the reader, which is exactly the effect sought by the narrator here.

A similar effect is to be found in the use of $\emptyset$ with proper names. Under the analysis suggested in the present paper, such usage can be explained in exactly the same terms as the use of $\emptyset$ with common nouns. A sign is proposed by α to β and immediate endorsement is expected. As far as the interaction between α and β is concerned, agreement between self and other is in suspense, and it will be reached if the listener succeeds in inferring the identity of the person (or country) thus called in the immediate situation (in the sense defined above). This presupposes that the listener shares — or at least is assumed to share — a common background with the speaker. As will be seen in examples (11) and (12), if such direct agreement is not possible or not desired, an article will be called into play.

In our analytical framework, therefore, all the uses of $\emptyset$ are amenable to the same unified treatment. They all involve the same recovering process, regardless of whether the referent meant by the speaker is to be interpreted as a continue or a unit entity, as generic or specific. As long as direct agreement on the thing-meant is sought, zero usage is found. As seen in the examples examined above, the agreement reached along the lines defined by the DIR Configuration (Configuration 0) often entails familiarity or intimacy. But this is only a consequence of the core value of zero in terms of direct agreement, as shown by other uses of zero where familiarity does not apply, as in example (6). Conversely, if direct agreement with β is not possible or not sought by the speaker, articles other than zero come into play. On this basis I have argued that *a* (Configuration 1) and *the* (Configuration 2) represent the two different

ways in which agreement on the thing-meant can be reached outside the DIR configuration.

5.2 *a/the*

As defined in section 3, *a* combines prevalidation (α anticipating endorsement by β) and imperfectiveness, insofar as some room is left for β to complete the validating process. In other words, *a* implies previous agreement on a minimal basis only. As agreement between self and other is being presented as reached on a minimal basis only, β may add other predicative nouns and is expected to do so (in accordance with the associative pattern). In contrast to *a*, *the* leaves no room for further development. Configuration 2, to which *the* belongs, precludes β from any further intervention in the validating process, thus imposing complete previous agreement (in accordance with the dissociative pattern). We may contrast *a* with *the* by saying that *a* initiates a sequence of possible subsequent predications while *the* brings the predicative process to a close; in other words, *a* has non-conclusive value and *the* conclusive value. The contrast between the non-conclusive (prospective) value of *a* (participation by β expected) and the conclusive value of *the* (participation by β precluded) engenders a variety of effects in discourse. The functions of *a* and *the* are neatly contrasted in example (11):

- (11) *His wife...When he thought of his wife, he seemed to see two people. One the girl he had married, fair-haired, blue-eyed, gentle, reserved. That was the girl he had loved, the girl he teased whilst she stared at him with a puzzled frown. That was his Polly. But there was another Mary — a Mary who was hard as steel, who was passionate, but incapable of affection — a Mary to whom nobody mattered but herself.*
A. Christie, *Ordeal By Innocence*

In the first part of the utterance, the narrator's wife is presented as completely summed up in "**the girl** he had married, fair-haired, blue-eyed, gentle, reserved" and "that was **the girl** he had loved, the girl he teased (...)". The function of *the* is to present this definition as not subject to change⁷. Conversely, *a* in the second part of the utterance ("a Mary") induces the image of a multifaceted person who cannot be reduced to a single, neatly defined unit. This "kaleidoscopic" effect is a consequence of the role assigned to β in Configuration 1.

⁷ A similar effect is achieved by deictic *that*. In my analytical framework, *that* is a marker of Configuration 2 and *this* a marker of Configuration 1 (Douay 2000: 140-144).

- (12) *Remmer said that he had a warrant for the arrest of Erwin Scholl. Pappen said he had never heard of an Erwin Scholl, and unless Remmer had a warrant to enter the property, he would not be allowed inside.*
A. Folsom, *The Day After Tomorrow*

As seen in 5.1, the use of zero by first speaker Remmer when referring to Erwin Scholl (“Ø Erwin Scholl”) instructs the listener that immediate recovery is, as it were, taken for granted. But, as explained in section 4, the DIR Configuration (Configuration 0) involves an element of uncertainty as to the actual achievement of the referring process. Here through the use of *a* (“an Erwin Scholl”) the second speaker Pappen indicates that immediate direct agreement cannot be achieved. The sharing process is thus impaired.

In the three following examples, the expectation of further subsequent development induced by *a* is exploited for stylistic purposes:

- (13) *The thin red glow of a setting sun sat on the horizon as a silver Audi sedan turned out of traffic on Hauptstrasse and pulled up to the front gate of the house at number 72.*
A. Folsom, *The Day After Tomorrow*

- (14) *Hercule Poirot had timed his appointment for half past six on a Saturday afternoon.*
A. Christie, *Five Little Pigs*

- (15) When he had finished speaking, there was a silence.

Examples of this kind are very common. Article *a* before “setting sun” induces the reader to let his eye linger on the scene. In (14) and (15) the prospective value of *a* is used as a device for keeping the listener in suspense. Whereas in (14) *a* arouses curiosity by creating an effect of expectancy, zero (“on Ø Saturday afternoon”) would merely have informed the reader of the day on which Hercule Poirot had timed his appointment. Thus, *a* enhances the impression of an atmosphere fraught with mystery. Similarly “a silence” in (15) suggests an atmosphere laden with tension. As a result of the expectation of immediate direct agreement coded by zero, no such dramatic effect would have been achieved by “there was silence”.

In contrast with the non conclusive value of *a*, the conclusive value of *the* is often exploited to close the discussion on a topic, as in (10) above. The use of *the* enables the narrator to literally put this point “in parentheses”. The suggestion, here, is that “there is no point in insisting”: as in example (11) above (“the girl

he had married”), though for different reasons, the person referred to is presented as completely summed up in “the well-known botanist”.

The conclusive value of *the* may also be used as a means of expressing the idea of some ineluctable fate to which we have to resign ourselves. In (16) below, heard in a movie, the speaker and the listener are talking about old age:

(16) *Dear God, can you imagine it? The rain, the loneliness, the regrets.*

C. Hampton, *Shadowlands*

The effect achieved by *the* is fairly easy to explain: because agreement is forced upon the recipient and because the recipient is precluded from any intervention in the validating process (as defined in Configuration 2), *the* serves as a device for enhancing the impression of a sealed fate. Much the same effect is achieved by the use of *the* with the comparative of adverbs and adjectives in correlative structures such as:

(17) The more the merrier.

The cause and effect relationship between the two comparatives brings us very close to the notion of ineluctability expressed in (16), hence the use of *the* which highlights the idea of a *set* pattern.

It has already been emphasized that examples like (3) (“Phone doesn’t ring anymore”) illustrate standard usage in everyday speech. However, it is quite possible, in the same situation, to substitute *the*:

(18) The phone does not ring anymore.

As a result of the different modes of recovery involved, $\emptyset$ achieves a foregrounding effect while *the* induces a backgrounding effect. I submit that such backgrounding effect is sought or required whenever other elements present in the utterance need, for some reason or other, to be brought into focus. The foregrounding effect achieved by $\emptyset$ is a consequence of the suspensive value of the agreement to be reached along the lines defined by Configuration 0. Validation, as explained earlier, is suspended between sender and recipient and thus kept in the forefront. *The*, on the other hand, imposes final previous agreement, thus keeping the achievement of the validating process in the background. The force of this distinction is of little consequence in the circumstances surrounding (18), so that either $\emptyset$ or *the* may be used. As noted earlier, though, $\emptyset$ usage is very frequent in this type of situation. Be that as it may, the backgrounding effect achieved by *the* is required, as suggested above, when other elements in the utterance need to be brought to the forefront. This may account for the use of *the* in utterances such as:

(19) Mind the step!

(20) Close the door!

The focus, here, is on “mind” and “close”. It is worth noting that the unmarked imperative form involves the same validating process as zero-marked nouns. As elsewhere, zero-marking requires immediate direct validation by the recipient, hence the imperative force of unmarked verbal forms.

6. Concluding remarks

I have defined articles as markers of recipient role (β) in the referring process. My suggestion is that the distinction between different ways of achieving interlocutive agreement does not only pervade and structure the article system but the whole internal organization of the English language. Support for this hypothesis can be found in the tense system: as shown in Douay and Roulland 1996, verbal endings ($\emptyset$ /-s/-ed) act as markers of the three configurations described here. To be more specific, zero-marking implies direct agreement, as it does in the article system; -s and -ed, on the other hand, are analyzed as coding exiting from the DIR Configuration, along the lines defined here for *a* and *the*.

Thus, when viewed in our conceptual framework, the article and tense systems address the same issue as the turn-taking system (Schegloff 1996) or the packaging of information in sentence structure (Lambrecht 1994), or again the core opposition between question and assertion, i.e. the role assigned to the recipient in the communicative process. In view of the general debate about the relationship between linguistic structure and language use, these seem to me powerful arguments in favor of a “radical” interactional approach that would enable linguistics to bridge the persistent and recalcitrant gap between discourse analysis and theories of language⁸.

8 «We already know a great deal about some very basic discourse phenomena, e.g. turn-taking, repair, topic organization, story-telling, discourse markers, conversational inference and style. There now seems to be a need to move from empirical studies of how we use language to (a) the development of models and theories that help us organize our knowledge about how discourse works, and (b) links between our discourse models/theories and our models/theories of language in general.» (Schiffrin 1994: 18).

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