

# Romance Linguistics Circle Cambridge / Newcastle

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## Varieties of definiteness and constructionist interpretation

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- 1 Introduction
- 2 Varieties of (Romance) definiteness
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English: *the*

*the cat, the cats, the water*

but zero with plurals and singular mass  
with existential/indefinite or kind reading

*cats, water*

zero with names

*John*

Romance:

article also with kind reading,  
whether sg or pl, count or mass

*il gatto, i gatti, l'acqua*

zero with names but not always

*(il) Gianni*

- the empirical domain is broader
- the distribution of *the* is clear-cut in some cases but not in others
- ‘kinds’ and ‘names’ are problematic as descriptive categories

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bears hibernate  
the bear is a mammal  
water changes state at 0 °C  
love conquers all

gli orsi vanno in letargo  
l' orso è un mammifero  
l' acqua cambia stato a 0 °C  
l' amore vince tutto

- the distribution of definite articles is more complex / diverse than usually assumed, across and within languages

bears hibernate  
 the bear is a mammal  
 water changes phase at 0 °C  
 love conquers all

three is an odd number  
 general Smith reports  
 black is beautiful  
 Tuesday is always depressing  
 Congress convened yesterday

the Thames is a river  
 the United States is / are ready

I have the flu  
 I have influenza

in the cellar, there are mice  
 I had to stop drinking coffee

gli orsi vanno in letargo  
 l' orso è un mammifero  
 l' acqua cambia di fase a 0 °C  
 l' amore vince tutto

(il) tre è un numero pari  
 il generale Smith è a rapporto  
 il nero è bello  
 il martedì è sempre deprimente  
 il Congresso si è riunito ieri

il Tamigi è un fiume  
 gli Stati Uniti sono pronti

ho l' influenza

in cantina ci sono (i) topi  
 ho dovuto smettere di bere (il) caffè

Giusti (2015):

Definite articles appear in many configurations not all reducible to semantic definiteness; they license [*uPred*] (formal case) at the edge of nominal phase, bundled with other features of the nominal spine

‘I predict that the theory of definite descriptions is independent of the various different syntactic functions that the definite article will be shown to have’ (p. 54)

‘Russell’s  $\iota$ -operator is non-overt and the grammatical morpheme *the* is the syntactic realization of a portion of structure that can but does not need to co-occur with the  $\iota$ -operator. This predicts that the grammatical element *the* does not always appear with indexical interpretation and *vice versa*, that we can have indexical interpretation even without *the*’ (pp. 55-56)

Romanian (Giusti 2015): clearest evidence that article realizes features on N spine

profesor-ul	a mers	la Paris	[ $\emptyset$ <sub>index</sub> N-DEF <sub>case</sub> ]
professor-DEF	went	to Paris	

I-am	văzut	pe profesor (*-ul)	[ pe <sub>case</sub> $\emptyset$ <sub>index</sub> [ N ] ]
3sg-have	seen	PE professor	

*pe* is part of the N-spine and realizes case; gender/number spelled out on N, no overt DEF

with a modifier, the N spine has one more segment; DEF is realized:

I-am	văzut	pe profesor-ul	tău	[ $\emptyset$ <sub>index</sub> pe <sub>case</sub> [ N-DEF [tău N] ] ]
3sg-have	seen	PE professor-DEF	your	

- the Romance empirical landscape is very varied

## French vocatives (Ashdowne 2004)

bonjour, les amis!

‘good day, [the] friends!’

prenez votre chemin, la fille!

‘make your way, [the] girl!’

salut, l’ami!

‘hello, [the] friend!’

li nostre Deu, vengez nos de Carlun! (Chanson de Roland)

‘[the] our gods, avenge us on Charles!’

## Romanian:

bună dimineața, fetelor!

‘good morning, [the] girls!’

- the Romance empirical landscape is very varied

Also:

u mest!  
‘[the] chap!’

(Italoromance, Bari)

(\* il) mio caro Masetto!  
‘[the] my dear Masetto!’

(Italian)

caro il mio Masetto!

(Da Ponte, 1788, *Don Giovanni*)

Contes de ma mère l’oye  
‘Tales of [my] mother [the] goose’

(French; Perrault, 1697)

- the Romance empirical landscape is very varied

In non-standardized varieties, the distribution of bare Ns and definite articles does not align with ‘definiteness’ or ‘familiarity’

Old French (all examples from Mathieu 2009)

**Cocodrille** est uns animaus a .iiij. piez et de jaune color  
 ‘The crocodile is a four-legged animal and is yellow’  
 (*Li livres dou tresor*, years 1260-1267)

but: title ‘**dou cocodrille** et dou cocatris’ (l.5, 132)

Il i avoit une fenestre par devers **le gardin** ...Et si oï le lorseinol center en  
**garding** [...]  
 ‘There was a window overlooking the garden ... And one could hear the  
 nightingale sing in [the] garden’  
 (*Aucassin et Nicolette*, early 13th century)

## Old French (continued)

**Chevalier** vienent dis et dis.

‘[The] knights came in groups of ten.’

(*Le Chevalier à la Charrette*, year 1180)

Si cum **li cerfs** s’en vait devant les chiens...

‘As the deer runs from the dogs.’

(*La Chanson de Roland*, year 1080)

Niule cose non la pouret omque pleier **la polle** sempre non amast lo Deo  
menestier

‘Nothing could make the young girl not appreciate the service of God.’

(*La Cantilene de Sainte Eulalie*, year 878)

## Old French (continued)

Nostra anceisur ourent **cristenté**

‘Our ancestors received Christianity.’

(*La Vie de Saint Alexis*, year 1050)

Bel num li metent sur **la cristientét.**

‘and they gave him a fine name, as Christianity demands.’

(*La Vie de Saint Alexis*, year 1050)

Mathieu (2009): definite articles express ‘focus’, emphasis, independently of familiarity and/or unique identifiability

(cf. Giusti 2015: ‘contrast’)

Brunetto Latini's *Livres dou tresor* (1260-67) translated into Florentine Tuscan by Bono Giamboni (before 1292)

Ci prueve que **vertus** est li mieudres bien de touz

Come **virtude** è migliore bene di tutti

'here it shows that virtue is the best good of all'

Si comme cil qui governe **humainne compaignie**

Sì come colui che governa **l'umana compagnia**

'like the one who rules over human society'

Car **vertus et honestès** sont une meisme chose

Che **virtù ed onestà** sono una medesima cosa

'for virtue and righteousness are one and the same thing'

## John 18:37,38

... ut testimonium perhibeam **veritati** ... quid est **veritas**?

(Biblia Sacra Vulgata)

... pour rendre tescmognage a **verite** ... quest ce **verite**?

(Lefèvre d'Étaples, 1530)

... para dar testimonio à la **verdad** ... que cosa es **verdad**?

(Casiodoro de Reina 1569)

... dass **ich die Wahrheit** zeugen soll ... was ist **Wahrheit**?

(Luther)

... per testimoniar **della verità** ... che cosa è **verità**? (Diodati, 1607)

... ἵνα μαρτυρήσω τῇ **ἀληθείᾳ** ... τί ἐστὶν **ἀλήθεια**;

(Nestle-Aland)

- the Romance empirical landscape is very varied

‘indefinite definites’

sono stato rapito dagli extraterrestri

(I was abducted by #the aliens)

la sedia è stata rosicchiata dai topi

(the chair was gnawed by #the mice)

Zamparelli (2002): kinds undergoing Derived Kind Predication (type-shifted to existentials); Donazzan and Gritti (2013): just kinds

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- inner nominal structure ('NP')
  - defines an entity type
  - expresses a property based on it (being an x that is an instance of N)
  - qualifies the part structure of denotation (divisibility, atomicity ...)
  
- outer nominal structure ('DP')
  - turns NP into a Phase and relates it to other grammatical objects
  - relates NP content to context and allows for reference
  - expresses a discourse referent, qualified by information in NP

- core cases: based on the semantics of definite descriptions  
'the unique discourse referent  $x$  which satisfies property  $P$  in situation'  
(a maximal sum for plurals and mass)
- additional language-specific constraints: definite articles spell out nominal features at D level
  - English: based on part structure (Division in NP), [Atomic]
  - Romance: based on gender/number, *plus* indexical-like relation to context (possibly including vocatives)
- rigidly denoting DPs (not just 'names'):  
'the unique discourse referent IDENTICAL WITH entity type  $N$ '  
(not relative to possible worlds)
- without reference to a situation, clear-cut distribution determined by Div in English; otherwise fine-grained variation (eg in abstracts)

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- Division-sensitive article in Romance (too)

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Classic 'definite descriptions': Elbourne 2013:

[ [ the NP ] s ]                    s = a situation pronoun

[[ the cat s ]] = the unique existing object that is a cat in the situation  $s^*$  denoted by s

$\iota x$   $x$  is a cat in  $s^*$

(familiarity implicatures occur too but they are not so central)

## Plural NPs: MAX

when N denotes multiple entities (*cats*), the definite article ensures uniqueness by introducing a MAX operator that selects the greatest sum in the denotation domain:

[[ the cats ]] = the (necessarily unique) total sum of entities that are cats (in the situation)

extension to mass:

[[ the water ]] = the total sum of entities that are water (in the situation)

typically in eg *the water in my cup, I spilt the coffee* ‘the whole contextually given quantity of N’ (spatiotemporally bounded)

classic 'definite descriptions' don't exhaust the distribution of *the*:

- abstractions: why *\*the love*?
- why *\*the three? \*the Tuesday? \*the black*?
- names: why *\*the John*?
- titles: why *\*the general Smith*?
  
- what does THE 'mean' in Romance?
- are they variants of the same morpheme?

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what matters is not 'concrete' or 'abstract', but part structure of denotation

purely abstract notions (*senses / uses* of words):

Tuesday comes after Monday

three is an odd number

red makes me nervous

water is H<sub>2</sub>O

quicksilver became mercury

love conquers all

shyness is not a virtue

what is truth?

point-like, conceptualized without internal structure

Romance: all with definite article, except *(il) martedì*, *(il) tre* (but # *il cento*)

many allow a mass denotation structure (with subparts), concrete or not

a lot or water / love / fear / courage / truth

*water* - spatially extended parts

*love, fear, courage, truth* (= 'truthfulness') - amounts, degrees

*truth* - propositional content

*the* with restrictions or contextual anchoring

the water in a cup

(spatially bounded portion)

the love / fear of God

(qualified, restricted)

what is the truth?

(true propositional content in situation)

(John 18:37,38 KJV: ... *I should bear witness unto the truth ... what is truth?*)

abstract reading of count singular: *the radio, the tiger, the mind*

specific reference to a kind-as-abstract-type; preference for ‘established kinds’, irreducible to a generalization of instances (contrast Moltmann 2013)

long novels / # the long novel are / is hard to finish

au Moyen-Age, il y avait des enfants, mais l’enfant n’existait pas  
(Kleiber 1990, Corblin 1987)

in the Middle Ages, there were children, but the child didn’t exist

the average American has 2.3 children (Collins 2017)  
# average Americans

*the N<sub>SG</sub>* refers to a necessarily unique abstract type (when *the* doesn’t express contextual anchoring or boundedness) – but N must be count

## English

[ *the* NP ] = unique individual NP, generally linked to situation  
(no plural or mass unless MAX in situation: *the boys, the tea*)

the wife	[speaker's]
the truth	[in the matter at hand]
the Italians	[in the situation]

(no issue of 'referentiality' or 'concrete/abstract': *I took the train*)

situation-independent reading, typical for generic / characterizing sentences, or reference to abstract kinds:

[ *the* NP ] if NP (singular) defines a Division into fixed-sized elements

[[DP  $\iota$  X [NP ... [Div: Atomic P (x) ] ] ]      [D  $\iota$  x]: *the*

[D  $\iota$  x]:  $\emptyset$  otherwise

## English

Compare / contrast Borik and Espinal (2012) on Spanish:

‘a definite determiner, standardly interpreted as the iota operator  $\iota$ , is responsible for instantiating a kind-denoting expression if, and only if, it applies directly to a Noun. Crucially, **no Number** is involved in the composition of a **definite kind** interpretation’

- (i) dubious ‘numberless singular’ (but certainly no number opposition)
- (ii) What of the *the* –  $\emptyset$  contrast in English count / mass?

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*the* in rigid designators

- names that tolerate the article in some dialects / uses

(# the) John

(il) Gianni, en Juan, el Juan, la Marie

- 'descriptions that have grown capital letters' (Rabern 2015)

The Giant Causeway

La Chapelle, la Via Lattea,

The Round Table, The Milky Way

Iddio, la tavola rotonda,

La Chapelle, La Roche ... (dicotopo.cths.fr )

(whether or not the description is true: The Round Table is a table, The Morning Star is not a star)

- some (classes of) toponyms:

The Thames

il Po; La Spezia, Le Mans

- titles

(# the) general Smith

#(il) generale Bianchi

#(le) général Dupont

## *the* in rigid designators

- [title+name] is a rigid designator as a whole (Acquaviva 2019)

general Smith could have failed to be a general

# general Smith could have failed to be general Smith

in this photo, a young general Smith celebrates his 4<sup>th</sup> birthday

( = 'a young stage of the person identified as general Smith')

(not 'a young general called Smith')

- [*the* + N] only allows a *de re* reading, not *de dicto* (Rabern 2015)

any other river could have been the second-longest river in China

# any other river could have been The Yellow River

*the* in rigid designators

- *the* is morphosyntactically a real article (eg alternates with *no*):  
... there would have been [ **no** Giant Causeway]
- these align with names AND kind-referring DPs with naming predicates:

Slim is so called	because of his slender build
the cardinal is so called	because of its colour
cardinals are so called	because of their colour
# some cardinals are so called	because of their colour

(Carlson 1980)

The Milky Way is so called	because of its brightness
# the boss is so called	because of his / her role

## *the* in rigid designators

- *John* ≠ *(il) Gianni*

no Division of reference in NP; name (possibly descriptive, like *Big Jim* or *Giorgione*) labels a *nominal sort*, a label for a type of entity:

The sentence ‘Vladimir loves Tatiana’ is, therefore, merely the formulation of a propositional form *x loves y*, where the variables ‘x’ and ‘y’ are governed by the rule that their instances or *values* come, respectively, from the nominal sorts being named “Vladimir” and “Tatiana”.

(Castañeda 1985)

[DP 1 X<sub>John</sub> [NP X<sub>John</sub> ] ]

## *the* in rigid designators

- *John ≠ (il) Gianni*

English: *the* does not spell out a DP headed by such a labelled sort

Romance (and eg German): article can be licensed by factors like familiarity (*il Gianni, il Cerutti, le Paul* ‘our X’), anaphora of an originally novel discourse referent (*il Federici*, but not # *il Draghi*, # *il Sunak*), marked gender (*la Thatcher*); generalized use of the article may derive from older titles (*en Pere* < *dominus P.*)

(similar if not identical to Giusti 2015:162: ‘proper names are nothing other than indexicals, parallel demonstratives to and personal pronouns ... they have an indexical feature that also contains ‘person’)

*the* in rigid designators

- NB: English does the same (ie N labels a sort and  $\emptyset$  is obligatory in D) with nouns-turned-into-names

Congress / Parliament has convened (uniquely identifiable institutions)

Company A will move north (labels A or 32 'classified' by a noun)

Route 32 starts here

Fox went to visit Bear (personified kinds in folktale contexts)

(so a sg. count N *can* occur without *the* in kind-naming function!  
But only where N is a sorted variable, not a kind identified with an  
unsorted variable, as in *the lion has a bushy tail*)

## *the* in rigid designators

- *general Smith* ≠ *il generale Bianchi*

titles are classifier-like elements forming a complex N: entity *type* [*general Smith*]

they *replace* the Division of reference – but they are compatible with number

generals Smith and Clark          i generali Bianchi e Rossi

[ D [ NP SG [Div general [ N ]]]]

[ DP 1 X = [general S] [ NP ... SG ... general S ] ]

English: ∅ because entity type [*general S*] is not made [Atomic] by NP structure

Romance: article spells out gender/number AND is compatible with identification between entity type and discourse referent

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## 'indefinite definites'

nelle cantine inglesi vedi spesso i topi, e in quelle scozzesi pure  
(not the same mice)

I was abducted by #the aliens – sono stato rapito dagli extraterrestri  
my chair was gnawed by #the mice – la sedia è stata rosicchiata dai topi

but:

maybe the mice ate your dinner

kind-level reference: *nominal*, law-like

è stata rosicchiata	dai topi	(‘has been mice-damaged’)
	da dei topi	(‘some mice did it’)
	da qualche topo	

'indefinite definites'

English vs. Romance: different expressions of kind-level entityhood

kind-as-generic-sum  $\neq$  kind-as-abstract-category (cf. Borik and Espinal 2012):

sono stato rapito dagli extraterrestri / # dall'extraterrestre  
la sedia è stata rosicchiata dai topi / # dal topo  
tu spaventi i bambini / # il bambino

wrong to take the impossibility of one as evidence against the other

(cf. # average Americans have 2.3 children  
# the bear gets smaller as you move north  
# he invented computers )

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Romance too shows sensitivity of article to part structure of DP denotation:

‘neutro di materia’ – eg Neapolitan

*o kkafé* ‘the.N coffee’ (substance) (Loporcaro 2018: 123)

*o kafé* ‘the.M coffee’

Spanish ‘neuter’ *lo* – Adj or even N as gradable property

*lo guapa que eres* ‘how pretty you are’

*lo mujer que eres* ‘how much of a woman you are’

cf. Southern Italomance, eg Sicilian:

*u scemu ca si* ‘the idiot you are, how stupid you are’

(finer-grained distinction:

Villalba 2009: Spanish LO-nominalizations express *property tropes*: conditions / states identified by their bearers, as distinct from abstract qualities taken by themselves

‘A person can possess *some* tenacity but not *some* being tenacious’ – Levinson 1978

la solubilidad del gas

# lo soluble del gas

‘the solubility of the gas’ )

N and D are affected in tandem, although usually N has just the same form

Maceratese (Paciaroni pers. comm., from Ginobili 1963)

*lu ferru* ‘the iron-piece’ - *lo ferro* ‘iron’; formal opposition both on D and N

*férru* (M) (count)

*lu fér(r)u de ca(v)àllu pòrta fortuna*  
‘the horse-shoe brings good luck’

*férro* (N) (mass)

*scarpe de férro*  
‘spiked shoes’

*salute de férro*  
‘strong [iron] health’

as in English (situation-independent), the form of D depends on [Division]

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### ‘varieties of definiteness’:

- data not reducible to classic ‘definite descriptions’ are not marginal
- the use of definite articles in names, other rigid designators, and abstractions, follows the same (language-internal) logic as in other expressions – no special expletive, abstract, or kind-level articles
- Romance: homogeneous enough to permit comparison (also with English), diverse enough to reveal a broad empirical domain

### ‘constructionist interpretation’:

- definite articles are part of the N spine
- they variously spell out, and are sensitive to, information of the N spine
- grammar determines a clear-cut distribution BUT reference to situations and other functions of article (indexical anchoring, etc) can blur cross-linguistic differences

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