

DEFINITENESS AND CONNECTED PHENOMENA

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The paper deals with the use of the definite article as a tool of pragmatics; a distinction is established between indefinite non-specific and indefinite specific nouns; the connection between plurality and definiteness in a few unrelated languages is demonstrated; compensating means for the absence of a definite article are enumerated.

Definiteness. Specificity. Amharic. Neo-Aramaic. Turkish. Persian. Polish

Although the notional categories of "known" versus "unknown" are universal, their linguistic expression varies from language to language. Not only some languages have formal means for distinguishing between these two notions, such as the definite and indefinite articles while other languages don't, but also the behaviour of these two markers is far from being uniform. Even members of the same language family present different kinds of behaviour and the defining system of one language often undergoes profound changes at successive historical stages. At the same time languages with no genetic or geographical link exhibit some pertinent common characteristics.

My study takes as its starting point two less known Semitic languages: Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia and Eastern Neo-Aramaic in its literary form. I try to place my observations within a larger context of languages chosen on a purely subjective base, namely languages of which I have some reasonable degree of first hand knowledge.

At the first glance it would seem that languages which have at their disposal similar formal means for indicating definiteness will also behave in a similar way in identical conditions. This however is definitely not the case. If we undertake a small statistical test of an identical text in English, French, Hebrew and Amharic this will become clear. The text examined is chapter number 7 of Genesis in which God tells Noah to enter the ark with his family and a pair of all living creatures and then the beginning of the flood is described. The ark had

chapter are anaphorically definite. In the sample all the bare forms of the substantives have been counted as well as all the occurrences of the definite and indefinite articles and of the demonstrative and possessive pronouns. Also the plural forms are listed in a separate column but they have been counted also under the other appropriate categories:

1.

	Eng	Fr	Heb	Amh
Bare form	44	13	35	79
Indefinite article	2	4	-	none
Definite article	53	82	63	31
Dem./ Poss. pronouns	12	17	14	13
Plural	43	45	21	18

The numbers show that in an identical text English and Hebrew contain about twice as many cases of the definite article as Amharic, while French has nearly threefold more. The numerical discrepancy in handling apparently identical grammatical categories between one Semitic and two Indo-European languages on the one hand, and Amharic on the other hand points out to a different conception of definiteness. But also the difference in the number of cases of the definite article between French and English is significant. French exhibits the highest frequency of definite article usage. It represents a stage in which the definite article became more and more frequent, by a process of attrition, to the point of approaching the status of a mere indicator of gender and number, whereas the noun with the indefinite article acts as the marked member of the opposition pair. As a matter of fact, the French definite article wasn't used as frequently at earlier stages of the language (Grévisse 1964). The ultimate stage of the process of attrition may sometimes end in full incorporation of the definite article in the substantive. That's what happened in all the Eastern Neo-Aramaic dialects where the ancient suffixed definite article *â* was incorporated as an inseparable part of nouns and adjectives regardless of their being definite or indefinite.

The interesting points in Amharic as compared with the other languages of the sample are: the relatively low number of cases with the definite article and of plural forms and, as its corollary, the great number of bare forms of the noun.

One of the reasons of the scarce use of the definite article is a very special construction which represents perhaps the most interesting contribution of Amharic to the general theory of definiteness (Kapeliuk 1994). In Amharic literature we find quite often cases in which the anaphoric definite article is dropped from a noun and then reappears again. We may see this from the literal translation of the verses which contain the word 'ship' meaning the ark, in chapters six and seven of Genesis; the cases with the definite article are underlined and those in which it is absent are in italics:

2.

VI 14. Make for yourself *ship* of gopher and wood and make rooms in the ship

16. And make windows to the ship ... and make the ship's door on its side
18. I will keep my promise to you and you will enter into *ship*
19. ... You will make enter into *ship* two by two from all living [creatures]
- VII 1. You, with all your family, enter into *ship*
7. And Noah ... entered into *ship*
9. ... They entered into *ship*
13. On that day Noah entered into *ship*
15. ... They entered into *ship*
17. And water of destruction was upon earth forty days and the water rose and lifted the ship and it was high above earth
18. And the water prevailed and it rose high above earth and the ship floated upon water
23. ... And Noah together with those who were with him, remained in *ship*

Whenever the ark is at the center of the message, as when God instructs Noah to build it (VI 14-16) or when its dramatical rising and floating upon the water is described (VII 17-18) it takes the definite article. On the other hand, every time that the mention of the ark is incidental to the plot, when Noah, his family and the animals board the ark and stay in it, the definite article is deleted. In cases like this the definite article serves as a factor of emphasis exceeding the limits of a single word or sentence and creating communicative peaks within larger stretches of discourse. The opposition between the article and its deleted zero form lends prominence to one word and attracts to it the attention of the reader similarly to the cinematic technique of the close-up. Thus the definite article becomes an agent of speech dynamics and text strategy, hence of pragmatics.

But the great number of bare forms in Amharic, as compared with the other languages of the sample, is mainly due to a special conception of the domain of indefiniteness on the one hand and of plurality on the other. The indefinite zone in Amharic comprehends two successive stages: one indefinite non-specific in the bare form of the noun and one indefinite specific, in which the indefinite article makes its appearance in the singular. The first stage serves as a general denomination of the "signifié", without referring either to a given concrete specimen or to the whole species, something which resembles the function of the first component in a word such as bookbinding in English.

The second reason of the high percentage of bare forms lies in the sparse use of the Amharic plural ending *och*. Mostly when plurality is meant without any special interest in the individual specimens composing the group, the bare form of the noun in the singular will be used. But when the speaker or writer refers to several specific specimens, albeit unknown to the hearer, he will use the plural, which by the same becomes more definite, as the plural counterpart of the specific singular which carries the indefinite article. In the following example the plural forms (specific but indefinite) are underlined while the singular forms

**3. and gize yä-Yəfag zəllanoç yä-Qaroda leboç lam-nna bäre
si-särqu yazu ... yä-Qaroda leba zäwätrəmm yatäqanall**

“Once shepherds of Yəfag caught thieves of Qaroda while they were stealing cows and oxen (lit. cow and ox stealing) ... Thieves (lit.thief) of Qaroda always aggress us”.

It is interesting to point out that an almost identical division of the indefinite space into two stages exists also in modern literary Persian and in Turkish. In Turkish grammar the term non-referential is sometimes applied to the indefinite non-specific stage (Erguvanli 1984). In Persian it was described by G.Lazard (1982) as "la zone du générique". This stage in these two languages is opposed not only to the definite stage, but also to the indefinite specific stage in which the indefinite article is used. Moreover, both Persian and Turkish, again like Amharic, use quite parsimoniously the plural forms of the noun. Very often the singular form of the noun is used unless the individuality of each member of the group is specified. Thus, according to G. Lazard (1992) "The singular is normally employed also in order to designate an undetermined quantity ... as a 'neuter' form, indifferent to number", and the same applies to Turkish in which the singular is defined as "numerically neutral" (Lewis 1967).

So here we are, facing three completely unrelated languages, which exhibit an almost identical behaviour which is characterized by obliteration of meaningful nominal categories in favour of a neutral unmarked form of the substantive. I don't know the reason of this behaviour but I could suggest that, at least in the case of Amharic and Turkish, it is linked to the very prominent role played in the sentence by the verb and to the great number of various categories it expresses rendering the other components of the sentence much less important for the message. I would add that in Kurmandji Kurdish, an Iranian language used in a Turkish speaking area, the noun has no plural forms at all if it is in the direct case and definite (Blau 1975).

Another subject to which I would like to refer is the special relationship between definiteness and the direct object of the verb. In certain languages the direct object is marked for case only if it is definite, whereas the indefinite direct object of the verb stands in the basic form of the noun. This happens for instance in contemporary Hebrew with the accusative particle *et* which is used only when the direct object carries the definite article or is notionally definite. The same may be said about the Amharic accusative suffix *n* which is automatically attached to a noun after the definite article *u*. And, what is more interesting, we encounter again a similar behaviour in modern Persian and in Turkish. In these two languages the accusative is expressed only if the substantive is understood as definite or specific. In Persian this is the function of the suffixed particle *râ* while in Turkish, which has a declension of six cases, the accusative ending *i* is added to a definite direct object only, the indefinite direct object remaining in the absolute case. The definite status of the direct object also renders it more independent vis-à-vis the governing verb and has its bearing on word order and topicalization; thus the position of the definite direct object is more independent and it may

very closely to the verb and resembles in some aspects the incorporated object of a compound verb. In the following examples the indefinite nouns in are in bold characters while the definite ones are underlined:

4 Amharic a) *bä-əgziabher hayl täwagtäw **däl** adärrägut*

"With God's help, after they fought, He defeated him (lit. victory made him)"

b) *däl-u-n əgziabher lä-Däjjach Wäle adärrägä*

"God gave the victory to D. W. (lit. the victory God to D.W. made)"

Persian a) *fârsi **dars** midahad*

"He teaches Persian (lit. Persian[he] lesson makes)"

b) *dars - e fârsi-râ sâat-e dah midahad*

"He gives the lesson of Persian at ten o'clock (lit. lesson of Persian at ten o'clock he gives)" (Lazard 1982)

Turkish a) *Murat **kitap** okuyor*

"Murat is reading [a] book (lit. is book reading)"

b) *kitabî Murat okuyor*

"Murat is reading [the] book (lit. book Murat is reading)" (Erguvanlî 1984)

The identical behaviour of Amharic Persian and Turkish in relation to the definite and indefinite direct object is significant. It may perhaps be explained by the existence in these three languages of the indefinite non-specific form of the noun mentioned before. Such a neutral form of the noun is most convenient for indicating the general object of a verb. Moreover, all the three languages have the following syntactical characteristics in common: a) all three place the verb at the end of the sentence; b) they have a relatively rigid word order and c) they make an extensive use of compound verbs. In communicative terms the final verb is the most important part of the sentence but the rest of the sentence components are arranged in a descending order of importance from the beginning of the sentence and down to the slot directly preceding the verb. Thus the indefinite direct object placed directly before the verb is the less prominent component of the message, closer to the incorporated object of a compound verb than to an individualized object worth of being singled out by the accusative marker.

The last subject I would like to mention is how languages with no definite article cope with the problem of definiteness. There are some alternative means which are more obvious than others, like for instance the use of a demonstrative pronoun in anaphoric definiteness so frequent in Polish and Russian and also in ancient Ethiopic and ancient Syriac. Another possibility consists in resuming a definite verbal object by an anaphoric or cataphoric pronoun with the verb. In Neo-Aramaic this procedure is mandatory and it produces what is sometimes called the object conjugation. But other, less common characteristics of the verb may also be exploited to this end. Thus in Eastern Neo-Aramaic, as represented by the standardized dialect of Urmi there are two kinds of present tense: one general *ki-pəṭix* "he opens" and one

speaker wants to convey but also by the status of the verbal object. If the object is indefinite the general present will be used; if it is definite the actual present will be chosen. In the following example the general present is in bold characters while the actual present is underlined:

5. *binijṣāni **ki -dij** mītrati xelani; kārḍi d qolxoz bi-pjāshinā xut mijā*

"In [the] spring strong rains arrive; [the] vegetable plots of [the] kolkhoze stay under water"

A similar possibility of using the opposition between categories inherent in the verb for rendering definiteness also exists in Polish and Russian in what is classified in the grammars as determinate and indeterminate verbs. These are mainly verbs of motion in which the imperfective aspect is further divided into two sub-categories one for general statements and one for a specific act, in which case the accompanying substantives should be considered definite:

6. a) *ona chodzi na uniwersytet*

"She goes to university (i.e. she is a student)".

b) *ona idzie na uniwersytet*

"She is going to [the] university (now)"

So we may conclude that the richness of the verbal system sometimes compensates for the lack of an explicit indicator of the definiteness of a noun.

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