

On Multi-Functionality of Determiners in Grammar and Discourse

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0 . Introduction

This paper aims to shed light on the involuted workings of function words in English. Focusing on the articles and the indefinite determiners, I propose a new understanding of the concept of meaning in grammar and discourse. Drawing on evidence from present-day English, I point out that each determiner carries more than one function and different layers of meaning. The indefinite article *a(n)* is a prototypical example of multi-functional grammatical item: it signifies ‘oneness’ as its core lexical meaning and marks ‘hearer-new’ information at the same time. Functions of other determiners, however, are not so well recognized. More often than not, one of the functions stands out and attracts attention, while all the others are backgrounded, unrecognized or neglected. In some cases, multiple functions tend to be treated as polysemy. The new approach to multi-functionality of determiners permits better understanding of linguistic meanings than have hitherto been possible.

1 . Determiners in English

A determiner is a grammatical element whose main role is to co-occur with nouns to express such semantic notions as quantity, number, possession, and definiteness; e.g. *the, a, this, some, my, much*. These words ‘determine’ the way in which the noun phrase is to be interpreted (e.g. *a car* vs. *the car* vs. *my car*). The term is sometimes extended to include other types of words within the noun phrase (such as adjectives)¹. Among the determiners in English, *the* and *a*, which specify whether a noun phrase is definite or indefinite, form a special class called ‘article’. *Some* and *any* are indefinite pronouns, which have pronominal usage, i.e. function as indefinite determiners². The rest of the determiners belong to other word classes such as ‘deictic (or demonstrative) pronoun’, ‘personal pronoun’, and ‘quantifier’³.

In what follows, the multi-functional properties of articles and indefinite pronouns used as determiners and in pronominal compounds, i.e. in combination with generic nouns (e.g. *somebody, anything*) or interrogative pronouns/adverbs (e.g. *anywhere, sometime*) will be discussed.

2 . *a(n)*

The indefinite article *a(n)* is one of the best known grammatical items in English. Somewhat less acknowledged is the fact that it is diachronically derived from numeral *one*. Consider the following sentences:

- (1) a. A student came to see me yesterday.
- b. We bought *a* Japanese car.

The speaker of (1 a) refers to a single student who, she assumes, is not known to the hearer. Likewise, the speaker of (1 b) refers to one car which is not known to the hearer. The indefinite article thus simultaneously marks singularity and indefiniteness of the noun phrase referent. The former is a lexical-semantic level function, and the latter is a discourse-pragmatic level function. We may summarize the double functions of *a(n)* as follows:

- (2) Indefinite article *a(n)* serves the following two-fold function:
 - i . to designate ‘oneness’ (semantic function)
 - ii . to mark ‘hearer-new’ information (discourse function)

Here, we need to underscore the fact that what we are looking at is not a case of ambiguity. It is not that the indefinite article designates singularity of the entity in some occurrences and marks hearer-new information in others. The two-fold function of

$a(n)$ is constant in all its occurrences.

The syntactic treatment of the pronominal determiner is not our primary concern, but it is generally agreed that there is a slot for a determiner in front of the head noun in a noun phrase. This slot has been variously named as ‘article’, ‘determiner’, ‘specifier,’ etc. depending on the theoretical framework. Compare the sentences in (1) with those below:

- (3) a. *The* student came to see me yesterday.
 b. We bought *the* Japanese car.

Definite article *the*, which will be the topic in the next section, alternates with $a(n)$ in occupying the pronominal slot. Thus, $a(n)$ and *the* do not co-occur with each other or with any other determiners. Kayne (1993) proposes that the syntactic category of indefinite article is Q (quantifier), while that of definite article is D (determiner). If he is right and if the two determiners occupy different pronominal slots, they should be able to co-occur. But obviously they do not, at least in English. The following sentences are by no means grammatical:

- (4) a. **A The* student came to see me yesterday.
 b. *We bought *a the* Japanese car.

One thing to be noted in this connection is the fact that the number designating function is unique to the indefinite article. No other English determiners designate ‘oneness’ even when they are used with a singular noun. Thus, definite noun phrases like *the student* and *the Japanese car* designate singular entities even though *the* does not signify ‘oneness.’ The singularity/plurality of noun phrase referent is morphologically marked on the noun, prototypically by */-s* ending. This may be taken as an indication of the semantic redundancy of function (2i) of the indefinite article. Redundancy, however, is not uncommon in languages. For example, plurality is often redundantly marked, as we see in such expressions as *those books*, *the two countries*. Logically speaking, though, just one marker should be sufficient. This is probably one of the reasons why $a(n)$ is named ‘indefinite article,’ not ‘indefinite singular article.’ But, as will be discussed below, number marking properties of determiners are not to be disregarded. Most other determiners are also sensitive to the number of noun phrase referent.

2 . *the*

English definite article *the* has its origin in the distal demonstrative pronoun *that*. Similar grammaticalization processes are observed in various other languages worldwide. Givón (2001 : 97) expounds the general diachronic mechanisms as follows:

- (5) i . In many languages, the spatial orientation of demonstratives can be expanded into temporal orientation vis-à-vis some reference point in time, an evolution that transforms them rather naturally into article. Thus consider the change in Swahili of the distal demonstrative determiner into a definite article. In this new capacity, the erstwhile demonstrative is de-stressed and is devoid of any hint of spatial deixis;

yule mtu ‘the man’

- ii . Demonstratives are often unstressed and cliticized when used as determiners. In that capacity, they resemble articles and other determiners.

‘that’ space time definite article

What needs to be noted in this connection is that, although de-stressed, *the* still retains its original function of indicating something as being distinct from others.

There are hosts of literature on the functions of *the*, most of which concern the nature of ‘definiteness.’ The received view is that English definiteness has to do with the speaker’s assessment of what the hearer knows, has retained from previous context, etc., and hence with what she can expect him to identify. We could represent the presupposition carried by *the* in its various functions as ‘I assume you know which one’. To cite a few latest propositions, Hawkins (1991) presents an implicature-

based analysis of the contrast between the definite and indefinite articles in English (*the* and *a/some*). For Hawkins, the difference between these two forms hinges on whether the intended referent is unique within a contextually-determined ‘association set’:

- (6) *The* conventionally implicates that there is some subset of entities. { P } in the universe of discourse which is mutually manifest to S (speaker) & H (hearer) on-line and within which definite referents exist and are unique. (Hawkins 1991:429)

Abbot (2006:4) likewise claims that definite descriptions presuppose existence (and uniqueness) of denotation.

Let us consider the example below.

- (7) Last night I went out to buy the picnic supplies. I decided to get *the* beer first.

Birner (2006:47) argues that the italicized definite article in (7) indicates that ‘the beer’ is individuable within the discourse model, either by virtue of being previously evoked, or by virtue of being hearer-old, or by virtue of exhausting the set of things described as *the beer* that stand in an inferential relationship to previously evoked information. Moreover, Birner (2006:48) reports Gregory Ward (p.c.)’s observation that the use of the definite with inferable information can result in a ‘tighter’ inference than might otherwise be made; the following are his examples:

- (8) (i) Little Johnny ate his first cookie today: Crumbs were everywhere.
 (ii) Little Johnny ate his first cookie today: *The* crumbs were everywhere.

Ward notes that in (8i), the maxim of Relevance induces an inference relating the crumbs to the previously mentioned cookie; however, the crumb in question might also plausibly include crumbs from other source. In (8ii), on the other hand, the definite indicates that the crumbs being referred to are the unique, individuable set of crumbs associated with the previously mentioned cookie and moreover that only these crumbs, and no others, are being referred to. Note also that the inference in (8i), since it is the result of a conversational implicature, is both cancelable (*Crumbs were everywhere, but not from the cookie; the cookie bits just added to the mess*) and reinforceable (*Crumbs were everywhere, but of course they were from the cookie*). In (8ii), since the relationship between the crumbs and the previously mentioned cookie is conveyed in part by the definite, it is neither cancelable nor reinforceable.

We may summarize the findings in definite determiner researches, as follows:

- (9) *The* is used in accordance with the speaker’s assessment of what the hearer knows. It signals :
- i . identifiability (discourse function)
 - ii . uniqueness within the universe of discourse (discourse function)
 - iii . exhaustiveness (semantic function)

As is the case with indefinite articles, the three-fold function is found in *the* in all its occurrences.

3 . *some*

English has two indefinite pronominal determiners, *some* and *any*. Most former analyses of these items and *some* have been influenced by the polarity sensitivity tradition. However, the relationship of *any* and *some* to such matters of syntax as negation and interrogation is incidental. *Any* is not a form that is automatically triggered by a negative or an interrogative, and *some* can occur in environments that supposedly allow only *any*.

As has been discussed by Bolinger (1977) inter alia, there are two kinds of *some* in English, i.e. plural/mass *some* and singular *some*:

- (10) a. [sm] the plural and mass equivalent of the indefinite article
 b. [sAM] used with a singular countable: the emphatic equivalent of the indefinite article
 (Bolinger:1977, 25)

As indefinite determiners, both types of *some* uniformly mark ‘hearer-new’ information, just like *a(n)* does⁴.

Farkas (2002) presents a comprehensive study of indefiniteness. She groups plural/mass *some* and *a(n)* together, calling them ‘ordinary indefinites,’ and separates them from singular *some*. According to her, singular *some* introduces an unidentified variable, i.e. a variable requiring the presence of several alternatives that are consistent with the output context, differing only with respect to the value they assign to the variable in question. The alternatives at play in the case of singular *some* are the live possibilities consistent with a particular context at a particular time, which are subject to being narrowed down as further information is added.

Consider the following sentence.

(11) From time to time, the train would stop in some station and a commuter would open an eye.

Farkas (2006:90)

Example (11) illustrates the random nature of the pairing of occasions of the train stopping and the station. Hence, Farkas gave the name ‘random choice indefinite’ to singular *some*. The reference of *some station* in (11), however, cannot be open-ended, since what is involved here are the restricted situations.

The referent of *some candidate* in the following sentence does not require candidates to be undifferentiated:

(12) In target of opportunity cases the department identifies *some* candidate they want and they offer the position without search. [Farkas 2002:92]

Random choice *some* in (12) signifies that homogenous alternatives exist in this context.

The multiple functions of the two kinds of *some* are summarized below:

- (13) 1. Indefinite pronominal determiner *some* is a ‘hearer-new’ information marker, implicating irrelevance of the exact quantity or identity of the referent. (discourse function)
2. The two types of *some*, i.e. plural/mass *some* and singular *some*, serve the following functions, respectively: (semantic function)
- A. Plural/mass *some* designates ‘unspecified but restricted quantity or number’
- B. Singular *some* is a random-choice marker, indicating ‘particularity’ and ‘random choice among homogenous contextual alternatives’.

The multifunctional nature of *some* as an indefinite determiner, noted in (13), is shared by its pronominal and pronominal compound counterparts. Not surprisingly, function (13.1) is shared by all occurrences of *some*, i.e. as a determiner, a pronoun, and in pronominal compounds. Let us look at the following sentences:

(14) a. He asked me for chewing gum and I gave him *some*.

b. Why don’t you go to *someone* else?

c. I’ve got *something* to tell you.

(Declerck:1991)

The indefinite pronominals, *some*, *someone* and *something* in the above examples all mark hearer-new information, implying at the same time that the quantity of gum in (14 a), identity of the referent of *someone* in (14 b) and that of *something* in (14 c) are irrelevant in the speech situations. A closer look at those examples reveals that pronoun *some* is the pronominal counterpart of plural/mass *some*, and that pronominal compounds all have the same properties as singular *some*.

4 . *any*

The following is a selected list of propositions made by five pioneer linguists who have paid attention to the semantics and the pragmatics of *any*.

(15) i . *Any* implicates one or more, no matter which; therefore *any* is very frequent in sentences implying negation or doubt (question, condition) [Jespersen:1933]

- ii. *Any* occurs in construction with a constituent that contains the grammatico-semantic feature ‘Affective’.
[Klima:1964]
- iii. The choice between *any* and *some* hinges on a kind of positive or negative expectation.
[R. Lakoff:1969]
- iv. The constant meaning of *any* is ‘counter-specification.’
[Anthony:1977]
- v. *Any* means ‘whatsoever, no matter which.’ It is extremely useful to negation and hence highly frequent in negation, but is not in a one-to-one mechanical relationship with negation.
[Bolinger : 1977]
- vi. The speaker who has a warning or a promise in mind is certainly apt to make the choices (between *some* and *any*) indicated.
[Bolinger:1977]

Jespersen (1933)’s explication represents the classical view. Thirty years later, noting the fact that *any* is grammatical in veridical contexts such as (16 a) and (16 c) below, Klima (1964) hypothesized that the feature ‘Affective’ is contained by words like *stupid* (but not *smart*), *against* (but not *in favor of*) and so on.

- (16) a. He was stupid to become *any* heavier.
- b. *He was smart to become *any* heavier.
- c. He was against doing *anything* like that.
- d. He was in favor of doing *something* like that.

(16 c) and (16 d) are examples with pronominal compounds, which are morphologically and functionally made of [determiner + noun] As we saw in the previous section, a determiner, a pronoun and pronominal compounds with the same etymology share their semantic and discourse properties.

Lakoff (1969) paid attention to the speaker’s expectations at speech time. Her observation expressed in (15 ii) is based on evidence such as below:

- (17) a. If you eat *some* (**any*) spinach I’ll give you \$ 10.
- b. If you eat *any* (**some*) candy I’ll whip you

Neither Klima nor Lakoff discussed lexical semantics of *any*, but paved a way to its treatment in a broader perspective. Anthony (1977) and Bolinger (1977) both attempted identifying the meaning of *any*. Their definitions of *any* as ‘counter-specification’ and ‘whatsoever, no matter which’ were a milestone in the development of study in this field, but, as we will see below, neither is considered satisfactory.

The problem with (15 iii) and (15 iv) is, first of all, the lack of persuasive power in distinguishing between the meanings of *any* and *some*. In our search for the meaning and functions of *any*, a comparison with *some* is essential. In his discussion of meaning-form relationships of major grammatical items, Bolinger (1977) pointed out that, in the choices between *some* and *any*, discourse considerations are in operation. His argument (15 v) is based on examples such as the following:

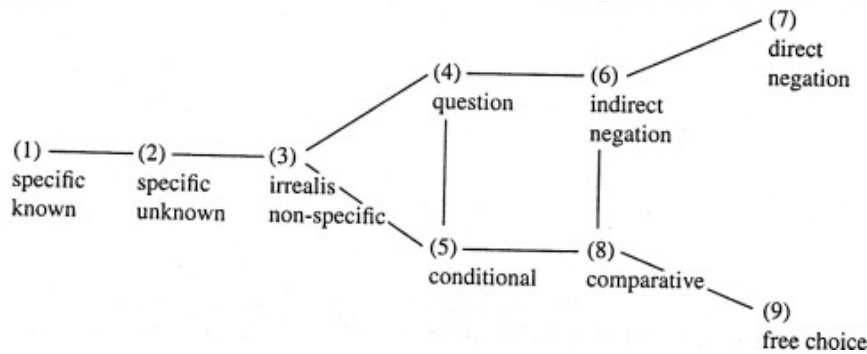
- (18) a. I warn you that if you do *something* like that I’ll whip you.
- b. I promise you that if you do *anything* bad I’ll come to your rescue.
- c. I promise you that if you get *any* good grades at all I’ll give you \$ 10.

It is inferable from (18 a) that the hearer has given some positive indication, by word or deed, of performing the forbidden action. Bolinger continues that the action is more particularized in (18 a) than if *anything* were used, which would make the prohibition more inclusive.

As to (18 b), it is pointed out that the relative unlikelihood, in the speaker’s mind, of her interlocutor’s being guilty of a bad action made her choose *anything* her feeling could be shown as a kind of scale between *some* and *any*: ‘It isn’t likely that my friend will do something bad in fact, it isn’t likely that he will do anything bad at all’, where *anything* sweeps the horizons for all possibilities and finds them doubtful. In (18 c), the speaker uses *any*, because just one or two good grades are enough and it makes no difference what part of the range they are from. Thus, in all three examples the speaker makes the choice of indefinite pronouns/determiners to suit the assumption/judgment she has in mind.

Twenty years later Haspelmath (1997) appeared, presenting a comprehensive analysis of indefinite pronouns in the languages of the world. Focusing on links between the formal properties of indefinite pronouns and their functional (semantic and syntactic) properties, he presented the distributional schemas of 40 languages and showed how this map works with each language.:

(19) An implicational map for functions of indefinite pronoun series



[Haspelmath 1997 : 64]

Haspelmath's subject-matter was the properties of pronouns, not determiners, and his main concern was the contextual restrictions on pronoun occurrences from a typological perspective. For our purposes, though, what is noteworthy is Haspelmath's adoption of the term 'free-choice' as the name for the usage for *any* in which a 'whateverness', a 'non-particularity' is implied. 'Free-choice' *any* has now become a standard terminology. Examples of free-choice *any* are given below:

- (20) a. Go *anywhere* you like.
 b. A seismograph detects *any* tremors that may occur.
 c. *Any* other man would have accepted.

Sentences in (20) infer nothing, particularize nothing⁵. Thus, a 'free-choice' *any* opens the entire field to inquiry.

Following the breakthrough made by Haspelmath (1997), full-scale investigations on the semantics and pragmatics of *any* (and *some*) began. Recent research brought about innovative findings and terminology. Lee and Horn (1994) named 'existential' occurrences of *any* in negative and downward entailing contexts 'polarity sensitive (PS)' *any*. Examples follow:

- (21) a. If you see *any* student cheating, tell me.
 b. That she had *any* power over Jim never occurred to her.

The name free choice *any* and polarity sensitive *any* highlight two different functions of English *any*, which poses a challenge to its univocal treatments. Farkas (2006:75) proposed the term *undifferentiated choice item* (UCI) as an umbrella term for both existential PS (polarity sensitive) *any* and universal FC (free-choice) *any*. These items are a subclass of special indefinites, i.e. indefinites that impose special requirements on the variable they introduce. In English then, according to Farkas, *any* is a UCI coming in two flavors, existential and universal. The following (22) lists three pairs of naming for *any*:

- (22) Two types of undifferentiated choice item (UCI) *any* in English
 a. existential determiner = polarity sensitive *any* = existential polarity sensitive (PS) *any*
 b. universal determiner = free-choice *any* = universal free-choice (FC) *any*

I adopt the pair polarity sensitive (PS) *any* and free-choice (FC) *any*, for reasons that they are simple and less liable to confusion. Farkas' terms 'existential determiner' and 'universal determiner,' though effective in logical analysis, dissipate misunderstanding as if there are two distinct determiners both in form and function, when, in fact, there is only one. The typical examples of PS *any* and FC *any* are found in (23) below:

- (23) a. I don't know if *anybody* came, I saw no one there. [PS *any*]
 b. *Any* owl hunts mice. [FC *any*]

Free-choice *any*, as is well-attested, have limited distributional properties. Most former analyses have tried accounting for the distribution of free-choice items in terms of the conditions of licensing and anti-licensing by the semantics of a given context. But Vlachou (2007) argues, on the basis of data from French, Greek and English, that free-choice items (FCIs) occur in all contexts as long as their lexical semantics are compatible with both the semantics and the pragmatics of the context. Consequently, the condition of licensing does not apply to FCIs. According to Vlachou, FCIs express widening, indiscriminacy, indistinguishability, ignorance, indifference and low-level. These readings can be pragmatically blocked in all contexts. Widening, indiscriminacy, indifference and ignorance can be semantically blocked too. An FCI is ungrammatical if and only if all its readings are blocked, in all three languages. Hence, the condition of anti-licensing does not apply to FCIs either, because it does not take into account the pragmatics of the context. The distribution of FCIs is, Vlachou concludes, entirely free with the exception of certain cases in which semantic blocking is expected.

As to the difference between 'random choice' *some* and 'free-choice' *any*, I propose that they differ in referentiality, the nature of the alternatives and the type of equality they involve. As we saw in Section 3, 'random-choice' *some* indicates a particularity, an assumed existence of something. Consider the following sentence, where *some* appears in a negative environment:

- (24) a. Why is your mother mad at you? Because we didn't eat *something* [that she told us to eat]
 [Bolinger 1977 : 30]

'Free-choice' *any*, on the other hand, requires the existence of maximal verifying alternatives of equal contextual salience. What is of crucial importance is that it does not preclude the possibility of 'zero.' The fact that *any* marks a non-referring noun phrase in all its occurrences explains the reason for its high frequency in negation, interrogation and conditionals. Compare the following examples with *any* in affirmative contexts:

- (25) a. John ate *anything*.
 b. *John ate *any* sandwiches.

(25 b) is awkward because we think of sandwich-eating as referring to a given occasion. Hence, *any* is semantically incompatible in such an episodic sentence. (25 a) is normal because it covers an indefinite number of occasions, and the free-choice *any* fits well. Unlike (25 b), (25 a) is not an episodic sentence: it refers to a possibility of occurrence, not to John's avaricious consumption of food at a time in the past. Similarly, (23 b) is a statement about the habits of owls, referring to a possibility of occurrence. Since it does not presuppose the existence of an individual bird or a species of owl, it allows a continuation such as, *but, unfortunately there is none around here*. If we compare (24) with (25 a), it is obvious that *something* in the former presupposes the existence of an entity, while *anything* in the latter, which is a non-referring pronominal, carries no such presupposition.

In summarizing the multi-functions of *any* shown below, I chose to use more standardized terminology and explanations than those used by Frakas and Vlachou:

- (26) 1. Indefinite pronominal determiner *any* marks speaker's 'affective' attitude. (discourse function)
 2. There are two types of *any*, i.e. polarity sensitive (PS) *any* and free-choice (FC) *any*. Both imply non-particularity and are semantically non-referring. Polarity sensitive *any* and free-choice *any*, serve the following functions, respectively:
 (semantic function)
 A. PS *any* sweeps the horizons for all possibilities, including zero.
 B. FC *any* implies choice among contextually unlimited alternatives.

5 . French Determiner System

A cursory glance at the French determiner system illuminates the general multi-functionality of determiners in singular-plural languages, as well as the idiosyncrasy of the English determiner system. French has two indefinite articles: *un* (used

with singular masculine noun), *une* (used with singular feminine noun); three partitive articles, *du* (used with masculine mass noun), *de la* (used with feminine mass noun) and *des* (used with plural nouns). They all serve multiple-functions, denoting indefiniteness, number, countability, as well as gender. The situation is similar with definite articles in French: *le* is used with singular masculine noun, *la* is used with singular feminine nouns and *les* is used with plural nouns, denoting definiteness, as well as number, and gender. The gender distinction is neutralized in plurals.

As is well-known, English indefinite determiners *some* and *any* are etymologically related to indefinite pronouns *some* and *any*. The situation is different in French. French *n'importe qui* (anybody), for example, has no morphologically-related determiner counterpart. It is noteworthy for our purposes that the lexical meaning of *n'importe qui* is translated as 'it does not matter who, whoever,' which is very close to the meaning described by Bolinger (cf. (15 v)).

6 . Summary

The theoretical work in semantics, pragmatic and syntax of the last three decades has shown that the distribution of functional items is highly complex and intriguing in many ways. This paper investigated the semantics and discourse functions of determiners in English and pointed out their multi-functionality and layers of meaning. Explorations into functions and distributions of other functional items in this perspective will undoubtedly benefit the pursuit of the nature of meaning in grammar and discourse.

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- 1 cf. David Crystal (1992) *An Encyclopedic Dictionary of Language and Languages*, Penguin Books.
- 2 There is another indefinite pronoun in English, viz. *no*, which is not discussed in this paper.
- 3 As pointed out by Bolinger (1977) *inter alia*, there are two kinds of *some* in English grammar: mid-scalar quantifier [sm] and indefinite pronoun [sΔm]
- 4 Though it is often erroneously assumed among non-native speakers that what separates *some* from *a(n)* is plurality, the existence of (10 b) type alone illustrates that such is not the case.
- 5 Note that *Are you going anywhere?* infers nothing, particularized nothing. *Are you going somewhere?* does infer something, so that *What's the big hurry are you going somewhere?* is a logical consequence, but *What's the big hurry are you going anywhere?* is a non-sequitur. [Bolinger 1977:34]

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(Received September 14, 2007)

