The definite article, accessibility, and the construction of discourse referents*

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that neither of the two main approaches to definiteness, familiarity or unique identifiability, provide necessary or sufficient conditions for the use of the definite article in English. I propose instead that the basic meaning of the article is to signal the accessibility of a discourse referent, more specifically, the availability of an access path through a configuration of mental spaces, or cognitive domains. Speakers employ the article to construct discourse referents under various conceptual guises, as well as to guide addressees in establishing mental spaces and appropriate connections between the elements in those spaces. The access paths are underspecified by the grammar, so the article is compatible with a range of functions in addition to unique identifiability (familiarity): discourse prominence, role/value status, and point-of-view shifts. The analysis is supported by a range of new types of empirical evidence gleaned from an examination of naturally occurring discourse.

Keywords: definite article; accessibility; mental spaces; discourse prominence; roles; point of view.

1. Introduction

The study of the definite article in English has a long tradition in various disciplines, including linguistics, philosophy, logic, and psychology. Researchers have analyzed the article from a variety of distinct theoretical perspectives—logical semantics, functionalism, psycholinguistics, and computational linguistics, to mention just a few. Nevertheless, previous analyses of the definite article *the* are remarkably similar in both the kinds of data they examine and the general theoretical questions they attempt to answer. More specifically, research has consistently focused on

what we might call the "referential function" of the article, that is, the use of a noun phrase with *the* to pick out an individual, "to distinguish it from all other individuals in the universe of discourse" (Lyons 1977: 179). The condition on the proper use of *the* has been labeled in different ways, such as "uniqueness" (Russell 1905; Kadmon 1990), "identifiability" (Chafe 1976; Du Bois 1980), "unique identifiability" (Givón 1984; Gundel et al. 1993), "familiarity" (Christophersen 1939; Heim 1982).[1] Theoretical and terminological differences notwithstanding, most (if not all) studies of the definite article in English share the same guiding intuition that definiteness is essentially just a matter of reference, i.e., of distinguishing individuals (besides the works just cited, see also, inter alia, Abbott 1999; Birner and Ward 1994; Chafe 1994; Chesterman 1991; Clark and Marshall 1981; Fraurud 1990; Grosz 1981; Hawkins 1978, 1984, 1991; Hintikka and Kulas 1985; Karttunen 1968; Kempson 1975; Kleiber 1992; Lambrecht 1994; Lewis 1979; Löbner 1985; Lyons 1980, 1999; Ojeda 1991; Poesio and Vieira 1998; Prince 1992; Searle 1969; Wilson 1992). These studies have generally proceeded on the assumption that there is little more to the meaning of *the* than its ability to pick out referents: "[unique identifiability] is both necessary and sufficient for appropriate use of the definite article *the*" (Gundel et al. 1993: 277).

Although this referential consensus has indisputably led to important insights, it is interesting that no one has seriously called it into question, even though it is empirically unsatisfactory: "none of the previous analyses can account for all uses of the definite article in English" (Birner and Ward 1994: 101).[2] The principal goal of the present article is to propose a different approach to the problem of definiteness, one that subsumes referential analyses under a broader discourse-based framework that provides the basis for a unified account of all uses of *the*. The theoretical foundations of this work are drawn from the accessibility theory of Ariel (1990) and the mental spaces theory of Fauconnier (1994), each of which consider grammatical elements in general to be discourse processing instructions. In line with these approaches, I propose that, in the processing of discourse, *the* triggers the establishment of connections between various sorts of cognitive domains and the mental entities within those domains. In particular, I attempt to demonstrate that all uses of the definite article mark the "accessibility" of a discourse referent—more specifically, a low degree of accessibility—and that the article is a grammatical signal contributing to both the construction and retrieval of mental entities. The referents of a noun phrase with *the* may well be—and often are—uniquely identifiable and/or familiar, but these notions are neither necessary nor sufficient for felicitous use of the article.

Of course, the idea that the basic meaning of the definite article is the processing procedure by which discourse referents are accessed is not in itself new (see Garrod and Sanford 1982; Givón 1992; Gundel et al. 1993; Kempson 1986; McCawley 1979: 387). What is new about the work presented here is the following: first, by abandoning the assumption that the article serves only to distinguish referents, I depart from the strictly referential intuition that has guided other work (including the aforementioned procedurally oriented studies, which have also concentrated on notions such as unique identifiability or familiarity); second, combined with a methodology that examines naturally occurring data collected from a range of sources (in contrast to most previous studies, which examine constructed examples), this broader theoretical perspective reveals new types of empirical evidence bearing on the meaning of *the*, that is, important new data and functions which have not been associated with *the* in any systematic way have been uncovered, and the main part of this article consists of detailed analyses of these new data; third, whereas previous studies focus on the "retrieval" of discourse entities, here I focus on the article's contribution to the "construction" of entities being introduced into the discourse for the first time. Overall, a novel view of definite article usage will emerge, one in which speakers select the definite article for a number of reasons: to distinguish (identify) discourse entities, certainly, but also to convey the prominence of a discourse entity, an entity's status as a role function, or a shift in point of view. We shall see that speakers commonly construct discourse referents under distinct conceptual guises for various communicative and rhetorical purposes— through, amongst other things, their choice of articles—rather than introducing referents into the discourse in a neutral, homogeneous fashion.

The article is organized in the following way. In section 2, I discuss previous theories of the article and show why notions like unique identifiability and familiarity cannot serve as a foundation for an empirically adequate account. In section 3, I sketch some of the basic concepts of mental spaces theory (Fauconnier 1994) and accessibility theory (Ariel 1990) and lay out a general theoretical framework in which the definite article signals the accessibility of a discourse referent, or more precisely, the availability of an "access path" through a configuration of mental spaces. Section 4 supplies the empirical evidence on which this account of the meaning of *the* is based. Drawing on examples from naturally occurring data, it focuses on functions of *the* which do not necessarily involve identifiability or familiarity—a high degree of prominence, role functions, and shifts to noncanonical points of view. Each of these factors can provide the basis for the construction of an

access path. In addition, we shall see in section 4.4 that the type of path is underspecified by the grammar, so that a single definite description may be compatible with several distinct interpretations in a given context.

2.   Previous theories of the definite article in English

Much of the research into the meaning of the definite article *the* can be clustered under two main headings: theories that analyze the article in terms of unique identifiability and those that analyze *the* in terms of familiarity. The former claim that felicitous use of *the* requires that "the referent of the NP be … uniquely identifiable to the hearer" (Birner and Ward 1994: 93). For a referent to be identifiable, it is generally agreed that the referent must be unique, i.e., the only entity of that type within the discourse model: "[d]efinite NPs refer to (the unique set which is) the maximal collection of things which fit their descriptive content" (Kadmon 1990: 274). Familiarity theories, on the other hand, claim that felicitous use of *the* requires only that the referent have been already introduced into the discourse: "The article *the* brings it about that to the potential meaning (the idea) of the word is attached a certain association with previously acquired knowledge" (Christophersen 1939: 72). There is no systematic uniqueness implication associated with the referent of a definite NP under the familiarity view (see Heim 1982: 27–33).

Familiarity and unique identifiability are not equivalent notions (Birner and Ward 1994; Lyons 1999). They are nonetheless very closely related:

there is a great deal of overlap between the set of entities that are (presumed to be) familiar to a hearer and the set of entities that are (presumed to be) uniquely identifiable to the hearer, since an entity typically must be familiar in a given discourse in order to be identifiable. (Birner and Ward 1994: 96)

Consequently, it seems fair to say that, although they diverge in minor ways, the most influential theories of the definite article are in fundamental agreement with respect to the main issues. They seek to explain the same single function of *the*, namely that in which the article is used to pick out a discourse referent. As a result, other possible functions of *the* have received little or no attention. There is also a broad consensus regarding the sources of definiteness, and thus the facts for which any theory of the definite article should be responsible.

One chief task of work on the article has been to identify the sources (grounds) of definiteness, i.e., the factors that permit the speaker to

assume that a discourse referent will be familiar to or uniquely identifiable for the addressee. Given the close affinities between the main theories, it is not surprising that they focus on the same sources. One representative typology of sources of definiteness is that provided by Hawkins (1991).[3] The first source of identifiability/familiarity identified by Hawkins typifies situations in which an entity is a member of the "previous discourse set", that is, where it has already been talked about: "mention of *a professor* permits subsequent reference to *the professor*" (Hawkins 1991: 408). Second, an entity may be identifiable/familiar if it is part of the immediate situation of utterance in which the speaker and addressee find themselves: "*Pass me the bucket* will be unambiguous for the hearer if there is just one bucket in his field of vision" (Hawkins 1991: 408). Third, knowledge shared by people in the same physical location ("larger situation set")—say a city or a country—may justify the assumption that a referent is identifiable/familiar: "[i]nhabitants of the same town who have never met before can immediately talk about *the mayor*, meaning the unique mayor of their town" (Hawkins 1991: 408). Fourth, a very general kind of community knowledge regarding predictable co-occurrences of entities may supply the grounds for identifiability/familiarity:

after a previous linguistic mention of *a class*, the speaker can immediately talk of *the professor*, *the textbook*, *the final exam*. All members of the relevant linguistic community know that the set of things which make up a class typically include these. (Hawkins 1991: 409)

There is an extensive literature on this class of definites, which have been variously described as, inter alia, "bridging" (Clark and Haviland 1977), "associative anaphora" (Hawkins 1978), "inferables" (Prince 1981), "accommodation" (Heim 1982), "indirect anaphora" (Erkü and Gundel 1987). Finally, a referent may be considered identifiable/familiar when the relevant information is provided within the definite NP itself, say by a genitive phrase or a relative clause, as in *the roof of my house* or *the professor we were just talking about* (Hawkins 1991: 410).

The previous paragraph summarizes the principal sources of definiteness that have heretofore been identified in the literature. It also indicates the standard types of data treated by both the familiarity and unique identifiability perspectives. Of course these data must be accounted for in any theory, but in section 4 I present several other sets of facts that are not discussed in previous analyses. First, however, let us focus on the problems faced by previous theories of *the*. To begin, while notions such as "identifiability", "uniqueness", and "familiarity" have a long tradition behind them, they are notoriously difficult to define in any precise way.

For instance, Hawkins (1984: 649) states that

[d]efining what it means for something to be "identifiable" is, however, no easy matter … an adequate definition of identifiability covering every single use of a definite description is probably doomed from the start.

In fact, many researchers simply take the notion of identifiability for granted and do not attempt to define it. Those who do usually talk about distinguishing, picking out or individuating a referent (see section 1). The problem is that terms such as *distinguish*, *pick out*, or *individuate* are no clearer than the term *identify* (see note 1 for other equally opaque synonyms of *identifiability*). As for uniqueness, the fundamental question concerning this notion is, as Hawkins (1984: 650) notes, "[u]nique in what sense? … [W]hat are, in general, the parameters relative to which singular definite NPs refer uniquely?" Much recent literature is in effect devoted to answering this question, and some of the main parameters are well known and clearly defined, e.g., a previous mention. But in many cases, it is difficult to pinpoint (much less give independent evidence for) the relevant parameter (domain) within which the uniqueness of a definite description holds. The enormous complexity of indirect anaphora (bridging) stems from this problem of delimiting domains; similar problems arise if we try to apply uniqueness to many of the examples discussed later in this article. (What would the relevant parameters be? What independent evidence would support a uniqueness analysis?) Finally, Heim (1982) has defined "familiarity" in a precise, formal manner, but her definition is so restrictive that a heavy empirical burden falls onto the notion of "accommodation", which is itself very poorly understood: "I can say only very little about the rules that govern accommodation" (Heim 1982: 372).[4]

Next, let us examine some of the evidence demonstrating that previous theories fail to account for the full range of uses of the article. Consider the following two examples of NPs with *the* which refer to entities that are neither familiar nor uniquely identifiable (more examples will be given in section 4). The excerpt in (1a) is about a scientific research outpost in Antarctica called McMurdo Station.

(1)   a.   Environmental impact regulations applied in Antarctica fill books double the thickness of the Manhattan telephone book and cover everything from junked tractors to condoms …

   Regulations are obeyed when possible but are breached in emergencies. There was the case of <u>the ice pier</u>, for example.

   McMurdo's winter supplies arrive by ship during the summer in late January and early February, and because of

coastal ice ridges and other obstacles, ships must dock at an artificial ice pier—a pier in McMurdo Sound that is periodically created by spraying successive layers of water on an enclosed rectangle of sea ice. As each layer freezes, the 300-foot-long pier grows thicker and deeper, eventually reaching a thickness of about 20 feet. Ships dock at the pier and unload their cargoes on the floating ice, which is connected to land by a movable bridge.

But ships, cranes and tractors wear away the pier, and every few years it must be towed out to sea and replaced.

"Under the rules, that constitutes ocean dumping", Mr. Chiang said, "and it was forbidden by the Environmental Protection Agency. But we faced a real emergency: if ships couldn't dock, we couldn't bring in supplies. So we just went ahead and towed." (*New York Times*, 7 February 1995, p. B6)

b. As he circled <u>the Indians</u>, Richard Alexander thought about buying one.

"I could see one of the smaller ones along a wall in our family room", said his wife, Sharon, who watched him study the line of colorful, hand-carved wooden figures outside a souvenir shop near the middle of town. "I'd like to come home with some kind of memento." (*New York Times*, 25 July 1995, p. A6)

None of the aforementioned sources of definiteness apply in these examples—the referents of both *the ice pier* in (1a) and *the Indians* in (1b) have not been previously mentioned in their respective contexts (the text in 1b comes from the very beginning of the story), they are not included within the reader's immediate situation of utterance, they do not constitute knowledge shared by people in the same physical location, their existence cannot be predicted or inferred from the co-occurrence of some other entity, and the descriptive content of the NPs themselves are not rich enough to allow readers to identify the referents on that basis alone. Interestingly, notice that the second mention of the ice pier in (1a) occurs with an indefinite article (*an artificial ice pier*), which provides evidence that the referent was not uniquely identifiable at its initial mention either. The examples in (1) show that neither familiarity nor unique identifiability are necessary for felicitous use of *the*. I shall argue in the following (see sections 4.1 and 4.3) that these uses of the article are licensed by factors such as the high topicality of the referent (as in [1a]) and the noncanonical viewpoint from which the referent is introduced (as in [1b]).

It can also be demonstrated that familiarity and unique identifiability do not provide sufficient conditions for use of the definite article. It is well known that there is frequently

a certain aversion to the use of a *the*-form immediately after the word is introduced … The greater the distance between the first mention and the resumption of a word, the easier it is to use it in *the*-form the second time. (Christophersen 1939: 29)

To illustrate, consider the sentences in (2):

(2)   a.   There's a cat in the yard. It's eating a mouse.
      b.   There's a cat in the yard. #<u>The cat</u> is eating a mouse.

The referents of both *it* in (2a) and *The cat* in (2b) are uniquely identifiable/ familiar by virtue of their having been previously introduced with the NP *a cat*, yet *The cat* in (2b) is quite unnatural. The problem is that the cat is the topic of the initial sentence in (2). Therefore, at this stage in the discourse, the referent is highly accessible (or ''in focus'' in the terminology of Gundel, Hedberg, and Zacharski 1993). To refer back to the cat with a NP in the subject position of the very next sentence generally requires an anaphoric expression indicating high accessibility, most likely a pronoun, as in (2a). The definite article is inappropriate in (2b) because it indicates a low degree of accessibility (see section 3).

The contrast between (2a) and (2b) shows that neither familiarity nor unique identifiability alone are sufficient for determining when the definite article will be appropriate. Given that we have already seen that neither are these factors necessary for felicitous use of *the*, it is clear that something else must be at work when speakers choose articles. In the next section, I shall sketch out a general framework in which the basic meaning of the definite article in English is to mark the (low degree of) accessibility of a discourse referent.

3.   The article as a marker of accessibility

McCawley (1979, 1985) and Hawkins (1991) have argued that a rich pragmatic structuring of the entities in the universe of discourse is required to explain the various uses of the definite article. They maintain that definite descriptions are interpreted with respect to an array of prag- matically determined subsets or domains within the universe of discourse.[5] Here I shall build upon and extend their argument by positing that the pragmatic structuring of entities must be even richer and more dynamic than they supposed and that the article itself is essentially a grammatical clue as to the sorts of domains that have been set up within the discourse,

the relations between domains, and the status of discourse referents within the domains.

The theory of mental spaces (see Dinsmore 1991; Fauconnier 1994, 1997; Fauconnier and Sweetser 1996) has developed in detail the notion of a complex, highly structured universe of discourse. It therefore supplies a useful theoretical framework and vocabulary for dealing with the linguistic and pragmatic aspects of definiteness. The theory posits that, in general, the production and interpretation of discourse involves the construction of a succession of hierarchical configurations of "mental spaces", or cognitive domains. These configurations are constantly updated as the discourse progresses. The range of possible space configurations is constrained by linguistic and pragmatic factors, but individual sentences by themselves do not explicitly spell out a single, precise configuration: "[l]anguage does not carry meaning, it guides it"(Fauconnier 1994: xxii). In other words, linguistic expressions are underspecified forms that act as prompts for meaning construction. Any expression is potentially compatible with several space configurations. Speakers and addressees determine the appropriate configuration in any given situation by taking into consideration grammatical clues, the previous discourse context, aspects of the immediate situation, general background knowledge in the form of frames, cultural models, folk theories, etc. The spaces themselves are mental models of discourse that are only very partially specified (unlike possible worlds). They are internally structured, with individuals, roles, properties, relations, and strategies. The process by which spaces are set up, structured, and connected is highly local in that a large number of spaces will be constructed over any stretch of thought. Thus, individual spaces tend to be simple; it is the distribution (partitioning) of information over multiple spaces that allows the encoding of complex representations. Grammatical morphemes, including the definite article, serve in general as instructions for the construction of spaces, the introduction of elements into the spaces, the distribution of information over a given set of spaces, the establishment of connections and relationships between spaces, and the accessibility of knowledge in a given space with respect to other spaces.

In general, discourse construction begins in a "base space" B (or "origin space"). This space anchors the interpretation of all deictic, referential, and evaluative relations. It is canonically identified with speaker reality, but as the discourse unfolds, alternate base spaces may be set up (representing hearer/reader reality, or that of a third person). From this space a lattice of spaces will evolve. In a given space configuration, one space is always singled out as the "viewpoint", the space from which, at that moment in the discourse, other spaces can be accessed or created.

The base provides the initial viewpoint. There is also a space that serves as the "focus", i.e., the space to which structure is currently being added. The same space may serve as base, viewpoint, and focus, but this need not be the case—it is possible for two or three different spaces to fulfill these three functions at any given point in the discourse. The mental spaces view of meaning construction is highly dynamic in that viewpoint and focus can and often do shift. These shifts are indicated by various grammatical elements or by pragmatic considerations (on tense–aspect markers, see Cutrer 1994; for other examples, see the papers in Fauconnier and Sweetser 1996). We shall see in section 4.3 that definite articles are used to convey viewpoint shifts, too. New spaces are always set up relative to an existing space that is either the focus or the viewpoint. Spaces are linked externally (to either their parent space or some other space) by various sorts of "connectors", or pragmatic functions, which relate internal structures (individuals, roles, properties, etc.) across spaces by establishing counterpart relations between the structures.

Let us look at a brief example in order to illustrate some of the basic principles of the mental spaces framework, especially those which will subsequently be relevant to our discussion of definite articles. Consider the sentences in (3):

(3)   Mary has green eyes. Max believes the woman with green eyes has blue eyes.[6]

At the start, we have only the base space B, which is also the initial viewpoint and focus. This space is structured by the information given in the first sentence in (3)—an element a, corresponding to Mary, is introduced, who is attributed the property "green eyes" (see Figure 1). Next, expressions such as *Max believes* are "space builders", which are defined as "overt mechanisms which speakers can use to induce the hearer to set up a new mental space" (Sweetser and Fauconnier 1996: 10). So the second sentence in (3) opens a new space M, which will partition off all information about Max's beliefs. In this new space, an element a' is introduced, the counterpart of the element a that was set up in the base
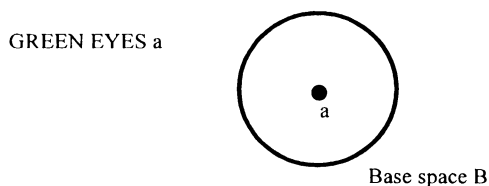
GREEN EYES a

a

Base space B

Figure 1.   *'Mary has green eyes'*

space. Like *a*, the new element *a′* corresponds to Mary but, unlike *a*, it is associated with the property "blue eyes" (the updated space configuration is shown in Figure 2). Since structure is being added to M at this point, this space becomes the focus.

An important characteristic of mental space configurations is the partitioning of information. As Fauconnier (1994: xxxviii) notes, the point of partitioning is "keeping distinct properties, frames and structures in distinct domains, even when, in some sense, they apply to 'the same thing'" (see also Dinsmore 1991). A simple illustration of partitioning is provided by the sentences in (3), in which two distinct elements *a* and *a′* have been set up, in distinct spaces, even though they both correspond to Mary (see Figure 2). The motivation in this example for setting up distinct elements which correspond to "the same thing" is that each one is associated with a different conceptualizer, *a* with the speaker and *a′* with Max, and each conceptualizer attributes a different property ("green eyes" and "blue eyes", respectively) to the two elements. The fact that *a* and *a′* are at the same time counterpart elements—they both correspond to Mary—is captured by the connection linking them across the spaces. This connection represents the common pragmatic function that relates entities in the speaker's reality (in [3], the base space B) to their counterpart entities in belief spaces (in [3], space M).

Given the connection between *a* and *a′*, there are now two ways of accessing *a′* (Max's conception of Mary): either directly, in terms of the properties associated with it in M (via the linguistic expression *the woman with blue eyes*) or indirectly, through its counterpart in B (via the linguistic expression *the woman with green eyes*). For instance, if Max believes he will marry Mary, the speaker could say this using either (4a) or (4b):

(4)   a.   Max believes he will marry the woman with green eyes.
      b.   Max believes he will marry the woman with blue eyes.

With both (4a) and (4b), the focus is M (structure is being added to the space representing Max's beliefs). But the use of (4a) accesses *a′* from
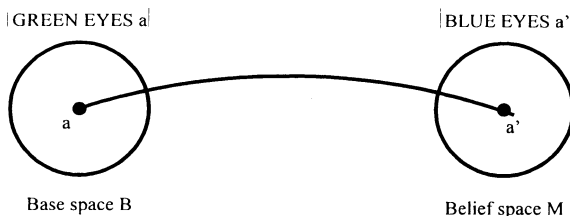

Figure 2.   *'Max believes the woman with green eyes has blue eyes' (adapted from Sweetser and Fauconnier 1996: 14, Figure 1.3)*

the base B, which remains the viewpoint space, thereby conveying the speaker's perspective (*the woman with green eyes* is the speaker's description of Mary). In contrast, the use of (4b) accesses a' by means of a property present in M. Viewpoint shifts to M in this case, thereby conveying Max's perspective (*the woman with blue eyes* is Max's description of Mary). Of course, this example is quite simple. A typical discourse configuration contains more than two spaces and, as we shall see, a linguistic description may be compatible with more than one path through the maze of spaces.

   The notion of "accessibility" is of particular interest here. This notion refers to the degree of activation of information in long or short-term memory. Highly accessible mental entities—those which are most active in consciousness—require less processing effort to be retrieved and implemented than do entities of low accessibility. Ariel (1990: 22–30) mentions four factors that affect accessibility: recency of mention (the more recent the last mention of an entity, the more accessible it will be); saliency (either physical or discourse salience); competition (relative salience of an entity compared to other entities of the same type that may also be present in the context); and unity (whether an antecedent is within the same paragraph/frame/point of view as an anaphor). One of the chief functions of nominal referring expressions is to indicate the degree of accessibility of the mental representations of their referents in a given context:

retrievability is crucially dependent on degree of activation, or Accessibility. It is the specific degree of Accessibility of mental entities attributed by the speaker to the addressee which is the crucial criterion determining the forms of retrieval marking. (Ariel 1990: 16)

   A number of researchers have proposed accessibility hierarchies, in which nominal referring expressions are ranked on a continuum ranging from highest accessibility markers at one end, e.g., zero anaphora and pronouns, to lowest accessibility markers at the other, e.g., proper names (Ariel 1988, 1990, 1994; Givón 1983, 1992; Gundel et al. 1993; see also the papers in Fretheim and Gundel 1996). Within these hierarchies, definite descriptions are analyzed as markers of relatively low accessibility, i.e., they generally refer to entities that are not highly active in memory. Evidence for this analysis comes, first, from the fact that definite descriptions can be extremely rich in information.[7] Secondly, definite descriptions are usually employed to refer back to relatively distant antecedents. Example (2b) illustrates this point by showing that a definite description is often ill-suited for referring back to an immediately accessible discourse referent. It is also interesting to note the contrast

between *the cat* in (2b) and the same NP in (5); this contrast is explained in a straightforward manner in terms of accessibility:

(5)   There's a cat and a dog in the yard. <u>The cat</u> is eating a mouse.

Whereas in (2b) *the cat* is odd because its antecedent is too highly accessible, the presence of the dog in (5) lowers the accessibility of the cat, making the definite description a natural choice in the context (more so than a pronoun, whose meaning would be ambiguous in [5] because of the presence of the two competing referents).

The evidence for treating NPs with *the* as markers of low (rather than intermediate or high) accessibility is by now well known and is cogently presented in the work of Ariel, Givón and others (see especially Ariel 1990: ch. 1). Assuming, then, that this aspect of the analysis is correct, let us return to the main issue at hand: can an approach based on accessibility—as opposed to unique identifiability or familiarity—provide a more comprehensive and revealing account of the various uses of *the*? In light of the general background considerations just discussed, i.e., the need to posit a rich pragmatic structuring of entities in the universe of discourse (modeled here in terms of mental spaces) and the importance of the notion of accessibility, my principal claim is that the basic meaning of *the* is to signal to the addressee the availability of an "access path", i.e., the article indicates that the knowledge required for interpreting a NP is accessible—that is, either already active or, if not, then currently available and able to be activated—somewhere in the dynamic configuration of spaces. If such knowledge is accessible, then the entity designated by the NP will be accessible, too, by virtue of the path (the set of cognitive connections, or links) that can be constructed between it and the accessible knowledge. Access paths triggered by definite descriptions—markers of low accessibility—are typically more complex, insofar as they tend to comprise a larger number of elements, connections and/or mental spaces, than paths triggered by markers of intermediate or high accessibility.

The interpretation of most definite descriptions is highly context-sensitive. In order to access the entity described by a NP with *the*, the addressee must usually seek information beyond the NP itself.[8] For example, one need not look any further to interpret the indefinite article in a sentence such as *I bought a book*, but additional information of some sort is needed to interpret the definite description in *I bought the book*. The knowledge (auxiliary assumptions) required for the interpretation of definite descriptions can be of various kinds, ranging from textual to cultural, from specific to general. Some kinds have been thoroughly elucidated in typologies of the sources or grounds of definiteness (such as

the one from Hawkins 1991 summarized in section 2), others have been noticed rarely, if at all. I shall discuss and exemplify the latter types of knowledge in the next section. For now, I propose that, in general, the interpretation of NPs with *the* involves the establishment of connections between the discourse entity set up by the NP and other less highly activated assumptions. Both the nature and the degree of complexity of the connecting paths may vary. The paths commonly consist of links between knowledge in multiple spaces—for example the current discourse space, spaces representing shared background knowledge, frames, alternative viewpoint spaces, etc. (as in most of the examples to be discussed in this article)—but they may also consist of just a single connection between two entities in the same mental space (as in [5], in which the low accessibility of the cat stems not from the need to evoke multiple connections and spaces but rather from the presence of an additional entity, introduced by *a dog*, in competition with the entity introduced by *a cat* as a potential antecedent). But in all instances, the definite article is characterizable as a grammatical instruction to the addressee to construct the elements and connections that lead (allow access) to the relevant knowledge necessary for interpreting the NP with *the*. Furthermore, the article itself does not spell out the precise connections that should be constructed in the process of interpreting any individual NP—the specific space configuration set up by a sentence containing a definite description can only be determined by the circumstances of the broader context of utterance. The mental spaces account of the article, unlike previous accounts, therefore predicts that there should exist cases in which a definite description leads different addressees to construct distinct space configurations and consequently, distinct interpretations of the utterance in which the description occurs. Example (22), discussed in section 4.4, shows that this prediction is indeed borne out.

Several other important points that distinguish the account being developed here from previous work must be stressed. First, accessibility theory has generally treated accessible discourse referents as mental entities that are retrievable from memory. In this sense, accessible referents constitute given information (the link between accessibility and givenness is explicit in Ariel's work, e.g., Ariel 1990: 5–11). However, I shall present in section 4 a number of NPs with *the* whose referents are portrayed (by the speaker) as accessible even though they would ordinarily be viewed as constituting new—rather than given—information. These referents may be construed as accessible, I claim, not because they are themselves to some degree already active in memory, but rather because some aspect of the particular context of utterance in which each

occurs allows them to be linked to background knowledge that is itself accessible (i.e., currently available and therefore able to be activated). Moreover, speakers employ *the* to cue the addressee that these background assumptions *must* be accessed in order for the definite descriptions to be interpreted. The range of mental entities that may be considered to be accessible should therefore be expanded to include some types of entities which are being newly constructed in the discourse (in addition to the cases of indirect anaphora, whose inferable discourse referents were previously analyzed by Ariel [1990: 184–190] as accessible even though they, too, are being constructed for the first time).[9] My emphasis on data involving definite descriptions that introduce new information leads to a second important point. Unlike other studies of *the*, which focus primarily on the use of definite descriptions to retrieve entities already present in the discourse (or entities whose presence can plausibly be inferred from other information that has already been explicitly introduced), I concentrate here on the way entities are constructed when they are first entered into the discourse by the speaker. An interesting question that has received little attention is: how do speakers present the entities they wish to talk about to addressees? I suggest that speakers do not establish the existence of discourse referents in a neutral and homogeneous fashion. Rather, they attempt to induce addressees to accept entities into the discourse under distinct conceptual guises. These guises represent a variety of functions that speakers manipulate for their own specific communicative and rhetorical goals (see section 4). The choice of determiner, I shall argue, is an important means by which speakers achieve these goals. The definite article serves as a signal instructing the addressee as to how the speaker intends a discourse entity to be constructed (i.e., under which guise)—a key factor in helping the addressee to access the entity.

4.   Functions of the definite article

I have described the definite article as a marker of a low degree of accessibility. It indicates the availability of an access path, thereby guiding the addressee in constructing or retrieving discourse referents. The critical questions that must now be answered are: what specific factors motivate speakers to choose a definite description in any given situation, that is, to choose an expression indicating that a discourse entity is of low accessibility? And upon encountering such expressions in discourse, what specific interpretations are addressees motivated to construct? In other words, what functions does the definite article serve?

To begin, there is no doubt that on many occasions the article is used to pick out, or distinguish, a discourse referent that the speaker assumes is

uniquely identifiable to the hearer. Numerous researchers have analyzed this use of *the* (see the references cited in section l), so I shall not discuss it in any depth here. I shall simply suggest that because a uniquely identifiable or familiar discourse referent is, by the same token, accessible (see, inter alia, Ariel 1990; Givón 1992; Kempson 1986; Wilson 1992), the various sources (grounds) of definiteness—prior mention, bridging, etc.—give rise to access paths in a straightforward manner. For instance, the P-sets (see note 5) of Hawkins, which in his model "define pragmatic parameters for the uniqueness of definite descriptions" (Hawkins 1991: 409), may be reinterpreted as establishing access paths, since each P-set provides the information needed to access the referent of a definite description.

However, we have seen in section 2 that other factors are also involved in the use of *the*. In this section, I shall examine several of these factors in detail. The focus will be on data in which *the* is employed in ways not often discussed in the literature on definite descriptions. We shall see that the definite article serves a variety of functions in discourse besides identifiability/familiarity—it may also indicate the discourse prominence of an entity, the entity's status as a role function, or the fact that an entity is presented from a noncanonical point of view.[10] Within the framework being developed here, each of these functions represents a conventional interpretation of NPs with *the* (because, in my view, functions such as identifiability, prominence, role/value status, etc. cannot be generated as implicatures via strictly pragmatic processes, e.g., application of Grice's maxims; see section 4.1). To wit, the basic meaning of *the* is (low) accessibility. Borrowing the terminology of Morgan (1978), this meaning is a "convention of language", i.e., a convention based on knowledge of the English language (the literal meaning of the article, present in all uses). In contrast, each specific function of *the* is a "convention of usage": "a cultural convention about the use of language, not part of the language itself" (Morgan 1978: 268). Although it is conventional amongst speakers of English to use *the* (with its literal meaning of accessibility) in these ways, none of these specific functions is actually coded by the article.[11] The precise function fulfilled by any given definite description must be determined in each local context (inferred through the aid of both grammatical and pragmatic considerations). In addition, the processes of accessing discourse referents in general, and interpreting definite descriptions in particular, are guided by the presumption of optimal relevance (in the sense of Sperber and Wilson 1986). Information is more easily accessed from short-term rather than long-term memory. Thus, accessing information from context types such as the immediately preceding utterances and the physical setting of the speech situation is relatively

inexpensive in terms of processing effort (Ariel 1990: 166; Kempson 1986: 214). Kempson (1986: 214) also claims that "information associated with concepts expressed by the lexical items used" is immediately accessible. The fact that the easiest contexts to access are also the ones that provide the grounds for uniquely identifying discourse entities (see section 2) explains why this particular interpretation is the most common. But there is more to optimal relevance than ease of access—processing cost must be balanced against the number of contextual implications that may be derived by the addressee—and as we shall see, there is more to definite article usage than unique identifiability.

4.1. *Discourse prominence*

The first case to be considered concerns uses of the definite article to trigger the interpretation that a discourse entity is highly prominent, i.e., that the entity plays an important part in the broader discourse context. One example of discourse prominence is the common literary strategy of employing a definite description to introduce an important entity at the start of a narrative, for the purpose of calling the reader's attention to that entity (e.g., the opening sentence of H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man*: "The stranger came early in February", cited by Christophersen [1939: 29]).

   An especially clear illustration of a discourse prominent entity is one that is highly topical. Most interesting in this respect are entities entered into the discourse with an initial definite description in order to signal that they will be topics in the subsequent portion of text, as with *the ice pier* in example (1a) (see also *the fire* in example [10]). A similar example is shown in (6), an excerpt from a story about James Hall, a psychologist who has suffered a debilitating stroke and is now paralyzed:

(6)   Hall has been thinking about God, psychiatry, analysis, fairy tales, dreams and the monkey trap. As a boy he saw a picture of a monkey trap in a book, and he has used it as a basis for a theory on human behavior. A monkey trap is a hollowed gourd with bait inside. The monkey reaches in and wraps his fist around the bait but can't remove his hand unless he drops the bait. The monkey never does. Hall believes the stroke got him out of the monkey traps in his life and freed him to do what he really wanted to do—read and write and think. (*New York Times Magazine*, 18 August 1996, pp. 22, 24)

The definite article in *the monkey trap* is used to introduce an entity that will be the primary topic of concern in the immediately following discourse. The analysis of high topicality (discourse prominence) is

supported, in both (1a) and (6), by the recurring mentions of the pier and the monkey trap, respectively, in the succeeding contexts (see Givón 1983 on ''persistence'' as a measure of high topicality). It is also worth noting that, parallel to the ice pier in (1a), the next mention of the monkey trap occurs with an indefinite article (*a monkey trap*, in the second sentence of [6]). This evidence strongly suggests that the referent of the definite description in (6) cannot be uniquely identifiable since it is not treated that way by the writer even on subsequent mention.

In (1a) and (6), definite descriptions are used to introduce prominent entities (new topics) at the start of an episode within a narrative. The example in (7) is slightly different. Here, a definite description (*the mosquitoes*) is used to introduce a prominent entity into the middle of a narrative sequence. The discourse prominence of this entity is motivated by its importance within this particular episode:[12]

(7)   A: And then during the week,
         we decided we'd go up camping.
         And .. the place that we'd picked out was –
         And that was what … time in the summer.
         Was that in July?
     C: That was … first of July
     A: Yeah.
         A = nd the place we had was completely under snow.
         That we were gonna camp.
         And .. so we ended up going,
         further down the … mountain.
         A = nd we found a place that we thought,
         gee this is .. such a nice … camp site,
         and we couldn't figure out why nobody had […] gone down to
         it.
     B: [hh]
     D: Uh huh.
     A: Until,
         about an hour later,
         when the .. mosquitoes.
         Hit.
     D: Oh no.
     C: There were swarms of them.
     A: It was –
         It .. had .. evidently .. been under snow,
         and just recently melted off,
         and the mosquitoes were .. incredible.

B: [mhm]
A: So we also left.

Speaker A chooses to introduce the mosquitoes in (7) with a definite description because the referent serves as the main focus of attention in this episode. Independent evidence of the prominence of the referent at this point in the discourse comes from A's pronunciation of the article as [ði] instead of [ðe], despite the fact that the following word (*mosquitoes*) begins with a consonant.

The data in (7) come from a conversational narrative, showing that the definite article can convey prominence in other genres besides literary narrative and journalistic discourse. Another discourse genre in which definite descriptions commonly refer to nonidentifiable entities is poetry: "Modern poets' use of definite NPs to refer to objects that are unfamiliar or obscure to the reader has become a canonical part of poetic language" (Katz 1991: 3). The work of Katz (1991) provides numerous interesting and complex examples of the use of *the* in English poetry, one of which is given in (8):

(8)   The hemlocks slumped
        already as if bewailing
        the branch-loading

        shales of ice, the rain
        changes and a snow
        sifty as fog

        begins to fall, brightening
        the ice's bruise-glimmer
        with white holdings:

        the hemlocks, muffled,
        deepen to the grim
        taking of a further beauty on.
        ("Bonus", by A. R. Ammons [1985], cited in Katz [1991: 143])

Katz's analysis of article usage in poetry is in general highly compatible with the analysis developed here in terms of discourse prominence. For instance, he points out that the occurrence of the definite article in the initial mention of the hemlocks in (8) is crucial in conveying the prominence of this object. This can be demonstrated by removing the article:

[c]hanging the definite NPs to indefinites seems to imply that the poem will be about a scene of which the trees are only a part. The first mention with "the" helps make "the hemlocks" the focus of the poem. (Katz 1991: 147)

There is another kind of prominence involving the definite article in English that merits discussion, namely, "stressed" or "emphatic" *the*. In these cases, the article is employed to indicate that the speaker construes a referent as an especially important member of some category. Traditional descriptive grammarians were well aware of this use of the article (see Christophersen 1939: 111; Jespersen 1949: 406), but interestingly, emphatic *the* is almost never mentioned in more recent theoretical work even though it does not simply signify unique identifiability or familiarity. An example is given in (9). The speaker in this passage, Gary Reber, manipulates emphatic definite and indefinite articles in order to convey his opinion regarding the relative prominence of different widescreen video formats; note that *Mohicans* refers to the video version of the movie *The Last of the Mohicans*:

(9)   The decision by FoxVideo to go with a widescreen format doesn't, however, satisfy Gary Reber, editor and publisher of Murrieta, Calif.-based Widescreen Review. "Mohicans", he said, is in *a* widescreen format, but not *the* widescreen format—meaning the so-called letterbox format. (*Los Angeles Times*, 12 March 1993, p. F27; italics in original)

Reber uses the indefinite article in the NP *a widescreen format* to indicate that he is not happy with the format chosen for *Mohicans* by FoxVideo—the indefinite article suggests that this widescreen format is merely an arbitrary representative of the class of widescreen formats. In contrast, his selection of the definite article in *the widescreen format* indicates that he considers the letterbox format to be a highly prominent member of the category of widescreen video formats (i.e., a format of superior quality). Interestingly, although many uses of "emphatic *the*" involve prominent entities that are at the same time uniquely identifiable (e.g., *You met THE Bill Clinton?*), in (9) the definite description *the widescreen format* does not unambiguously identify a unique object. As a result, the writer of the passage must go on to specify the intended referent (*the so-called letterbox format*) for the reader.

None of the uses of *the* discussed in the foregoing is motivated by the unique identifiability or familiarity of the respective discourse referents. Rather, I analyze each referent as accessible information; and in these contexts, each one is interpreted as a prominent entity. Before going further into the details of this analysis, let us examine some alternative analyses of the data presented in this section. First, Clark and Haviland (1977: 7–8) employ the term "addition" to describe the phenomenon whereby *the* serves to introduce a new discourse referent at the very beginning of a story. They claim that such violations of the uniqueness

requirement on definite descriptions are possible because they have become a conventionalized aspect of literary discourse (see also Lambrecht 1994: 197). While this phenomenon is undoubtedly a literary convention, we have also seen that it is more general than that. The use of *the* to introduce new topics is not restricted to literature, nor does it occur solely at the beginning of a text. In examples (1a) and (6), it occurs at the beginning of an episode within a narrative (see also examples [10] and [11] which follow), and in (7) it occurs at the midpoint of a narrative sequence. As a result, these counterexamples to uniqueness/familiarity cannot be dismissed as an idiosyncratic feature of literary language.

Second, one might propose that, instead of analyzing *the* as a marker of accessibility, the basic meaning of the article should remain unique identifiability and that the prominence associated with the entities in these examples should be derived pragmatically as an extension from this basic meaning. For instance, Abbott (1999) argues that "emphatic *the*" conveys prominence through hyperbole. In her view, a sentence such as *Outside the US, soccer is THE sport* literally says that soccer is the only (i.e., unique) sport in those countries, which is false. She claims that "standard Gricean mechanisms" are then invoked, producing the hyperbolic understanding that soccer is a highly prominent sport (Abbott 1999: 3). She does not, however, give any details concerning the nature of these standard Gricean mechanisms. The assumption seems to be that to give a Gricean account of the prominence cases would be a straightforward matter. To the contrary, I believe that a principled Gricean account would be difficult to construct. Such an account would have to elaborate a pragmatic constraint that—when the uniqueness condition is flouted—systematically gives rise to the implication that the referent is a very important member of a category. The proper constraint must also exclude all other pragmatic implications that could plausibly be drawn in these situations, e.g., it must rule out the interpretation according to which soccer is the *least* important sport outside the US (this sort of hyperbolic interpretation is impossible, despite the fact that it appears to be compatible with an expression whose literal meaning involves uniqueness). Then, a Gricean account would have to provide a separate pragmatic mechanism to account for the discourse prominence cases, one that explains how flouting the uniqueness condition gives rise precisely to the implication that the entity designated by the definite description will be highly topical.

Another argument against a Grice-style, pragmatic account of the data in this section comes from cases in which a definite description is employed to introduce an entity that is manifestly intended to be discourse prominent (a new topic of discussion). It is interesting that a definite article is more appropriate in these obvious topic-introducing contexts

than an indefinite article, even though the NPs in question refer to entities that are neither uniquely identifiable nor familiar. Consider first the example in (10):

(10)   [Elias Ayuso] had been an academic gypsy ever since <u>the fire</u>. It was third grade, and the drug dealer living below him had reneged on a debt. Arsonists were sent to teach the dealer a lesson, and in the process, half the high-rise was rendered homeless. Ayuso's Puerto Rican mother, Socorro, had no relatives in New York … The Red Cross placed them temporarily in a hotel, then shuttled them to a cluster of shelters. Ayuso switched elementary schools twice and could barely read a Dr. Seuss book. (*New York Times*, 1 August 1995, p. B11)

Unlike the discourse prominence cases in (1a) and (6) to (8), in which both definite and indefinite determiners would be equally felicitous in the same contexts (though with different interpretations), the latter, surprisingly, is somewhat odd in the context of (10). Here, the definite article+noun combination (*the fire*) is more natural than the corresponding NP with indefinite article+noun (*a fire*). I claim that the definite article in (10) is preferred because the manifest prominence of the fire makes this discourse entity accessible to addressees (for more details on discourse prominence and accessibility, see later). The fire is an object of great inherent interest, one that clearly warrants further discussion, and it does indeed turn out to be highly topical in the immediately succeeding discourse (note the recurrence of related lexical items, e.g., *arsonists, the blaze*). In contrast, use of the indefinite article+noun results in a sentence that is not informative enough to be appropriate in this context, since the indefinite suggests that the fire is a completely inaccessible discourse referent, in other words, *not* necessarily relevant in this context. More complex indefinite NPs (say, *a fire that destroyed the apartment he lived in as a child*), however, seem more natural than *a fire* (without modifiers) because they are more informative.[13]

   Although the restrictions on article usage in contexts such as (10) are presumably most common in written genres, a similar phenomenon can be observed in ordinary spoken English, as well. The definite article is preferred over the indefinite article when speakers attempt to introduce new topics in face-to-face conversation by means of constructions that are clearly designed for this very purpose, such as the first question in (11):

(11)   M: Did you hear about <u>the fight</u>?
       A: What fight?
       M: Between Bob and Grandpa …

This example is drawn from a conversation between the author (A) and his mother (M). Although M knew very well that A had not heard about the fight (i.e., that the referent was not identifiable to A), *the fight* is more natural than *a fight* in (11) because M obviously intended that the fight become the next topic of conversation; and once this topic had been accepted into the discourse by A (*What fight?*), M did in fact go on to talk about it in detail. Examples such as (10) and (11) involve the introduction into the discourse of an entity that manifestly requires further elaboration, that is, the speaker intends it to be a new topic and assumes that the addressee is aware of this intention (and that the addressee will permit the speaker to continue talking about the entity). The fact that the indefinite article is odd in examples (10) and (11) shows that there is a constraint on article usage in English requiring a manifestly topical discourse entity to be introduced with *the* rather than *a*, even if the entity is not uniquely identifiable. The existence of this sort of constraint is quite bizarre and totally unexpected under theories in which the basic meaning of *the* is unique identifiability or familiarity—why should a form (in our case, *the*) be obligatory precisely in a context in which the conditions that fit its meaning are absent (especially when another form exists, namely *a*, whose meaning—unidentifiability—apparently does fit the context)? On the other hand, if the basic meaning of the definite article involves accessibility, and high topicality is one conventional characteristic of accessible discourse entities (as I have argued), then the preference for *the* over *a* in examples (10) and (11) is normal and predictable.

We have now seen that the definite article can be used to convey the prominence of a discourse entity. In what sense, though, are such entities accessible? To answer this question, notice that in several of the examples in this section, indefinite determiners could be substituted for *the* (as already observed with respect to [8]), as should be expected of NPs expressing new information. At first glance, this possibility might be taken to indicate that these definite descriptions are not being used to refer to accessible entities since indefinites, such as *a*, signal that the speaker presumes the entity is not accessible to the addressee. But these NPs with *the* clearly have different meanings from the corresponding versions with indefinite determiners (see the discussion of [8]). The contrast in meaning between the formally definite and indefinite alternatives suggests that different representations of the newly introduced entity are constructed in each case—in other words, the entities are set up under distinct conceptual guises. By choosing *the*, the speaker cues the addressee to construct the discourse entity under the guise of a highly prominent object (on the other hand, the indefinite *a* tells the addressee to construct the entity under the more ordinary guise of a nonprominent object).

The entities designated by these definite descriptions can be considered accessible because addressees interpret them by attempting to link them to other accessible elements (or other retrievable information, more generally) within the evolving discourse configuration. In the case of "emphatic" *the*, the accessible information licensing the reading of prominence is supplied by knowledge of the category (of which the entity is a member) in the larger context. Once the category is retrieved from background knowledge, an access path can be established linking the entity to an important position therein, i.e., the entity is implicitly contrasted with and interpreted as more important than the other members of the category. This interpretation is conventionally associated with various formal signs co-occurring with the article, such as phonological stressing or italicization of *the*.

   In the discourse prominence cases, the entity's accessibility depends on the addressee's ability to recognize that the entity will play an important part in the subsequent discourse (as a topic or focus of attention). When first introduced, no representation of the entity can be retrieved from memory, so a new representation must be set up (similarly to indefinites). But a definite description referring to a discourse prominent entity differs from an indefinite description insofar as the definite (but not the indefinite) helps create the immediate expectation on the part of the addressee that the speaker is likely to continue talking about the entity. In accordance with this expectation, the addressee constructs the discourse referent under the guise of a highly prominent entity. Several other considerations besides the presence of the definite article may combine to facilitate the addressee's recognition of the entity's importance. First, these cases often involve referents that are, by their very nature, manifestly prominent. In other words, they are obviously interesting and/or unusual referents, ones that attract attention and naturally call for further elaboration: an ice pier (1a), a monkey trap (6), a fire (10), a fight (11). If relatively more mundane referents are involved, certain formal indications of prominence may compensate for the lack of any obvious prominence. For example, in (7), the article in *the mosquitoes* receives heavier stress than usual; in (8), *the hemlocks* occurs in initial position in the text (a position that is inherently prominent, especially in a short poem). Finally, these discourse prominent entities often appear in contexts that are conventionally associated with high topicality, e.g., at the start of a new narrative episode (see examples [6] and [10]) and in topic-introducing questions (see [11]). Speakers count on the addressee's ability to mobilize diverse types of background knowledge, i.e., they assume that the addressee can and will access the lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic knowledge, knowledge of the conventions concerning each discourse genre, etc., that is necessary to

infer the prominence of the referent. Background information of this sort must be available for the discourse prominence reading of a definite description to arise, and indeed, these uses of *the* alert the addressee to access such information. Thus, discourse prominent referents can be considered accessible, not because their representations are stored in memory but because they must be linked to retrievable background information in order to be interpreted. The speaker's use of *the* in NPs such as the ones in (1a), (6) to (8), and (10) and (11) instructs the addressee to establish a representation of the entity within a mental space configuration which is incomplete at that point in the discourse, since the addressee cannot yet identify the entity and does not yet know the reasons for its prominence. At the same time, the addressee takes *the* to be a strong cue that the configuration will evolve in a certain direction (i.e., along a certain mental space path), towards a more elaborate representation of the entity, as the speaker continues talking about it.

It seems reasonable to suppose that discourse prominence (when attributed to new discourse entities) represents a very low degree of accessibility, certainly lower than unique identifiability/familiarity, and perhaps the lowest degree of accessibility that can be marked by definite articles. The addressee knows relatively little about these new, prominent entities at the time they first enter the discourse. As a result, NPs used to introduce discourse prominent entities exact an especially high processing cost on the addressee because these entities must be held in short-term memory until an explanation of their precise identity and/or prominence is subsequently supplied by the speaker. Nevertheless, these NPs are felicitous because the high processing costs are offset by the rich contextual inferences that are drawn concerning the entity and its relation to the context—because of its prominence—thereby assuring that optimal relevance (Sperber and Wilson 1986) is achieved.

4.2. *Roles*

In this section, we consider another conceptual guise under which discourse entities are often constructed through the use of definite descriptions, that is, as "role" functions ("value-free" interpretations of NPs in the terminology of Barwise and Perry [1983: 150–151]). NPs that designate roles are used to refer to a fixed property, not to a particular individual. Furthermore, the individual who fulfills the role (known as the role's "value") may vary when contextual parameters such as the time, place, situation, etc. are changed. For example, the role NP *the president*, if used in the US in 2000, would have the value *Clinton*; if used in the US in 1982, it would have the value *Reagan*; if used in France in 2000,

it would have the value *Chirac*; and so on. Many definite descriptions can be used to access either a role or a value of that role. The appropriate reading is generally determined by contextual factors (in similar fashion, context also determines whether NPs with *the* receive an individual or a generic interpretation). Thus, in a sentence such as *The president addresses Congress every January*, the NP *The president* accesses the role of president. In *The president is addressing the Congress today*, the same NP is likely to be interpreted as accessing a value of the role (here, factors such as tense/aspect and the type of adverbial favor each of the different readings). In a sentence such as *The president has a difficult job*, the NP *The president* is ambiguous—without further context, it can be read as either a role or a value (roles and values are discussed in more detail in Fauconnier 1994: 39–51).

The use of definite descriptions to designate roles is nicely illustrated through NPs in which the speaker has a choice between a definite and an indefinite article. Consider the passage in (12), about a boxing match:

(12)   Now Foreman's feet were planted. Now Moorer made the big mistake. He crouched ever so slightly. His chin was on a straight line with Foreman's feared right. It came straight and true and Moorer never had a chance. (*New York Times*, 7 November 1994, p. B13)

In this example, the definite article in *the big mistake* is employed to convey the idea that in any boxing match (or perhaps even any sporting event), one participant typically makes a major mistake that causes him/her to lose the fight.[14] The following sentences then describe the specific mistake made by Moorer in that particular fight against Foreman. Put another way, *the big mistake* is employed to refer to a role in the frame representing our stereotypical knowledge of the events that characterize boxing matches. It implies that anyone possessing knowledge of the frame would expect such a mistake to be made at some point in any fight. The sentences following *the big mistake* describe the individual value that instantiates the role for that particular fight. Had the writer chosen an indefinite article (*a big mistake*), the NP would have categorized the scenario as a single isolated instance in which a boxer (Moorer) made an important mistake made in a fight. The NP with *a* would not introduce a role in this context and there would be no suggestion that such a mistake is a stereotypical aspect of boxing matches.

Definite descriptions in predicate nominal position are frequently used to refer to a role of which the subject NP represents a value (see Sakahara 1996). These definite descriptions have been analyzed as representing a "uniquely determining" property, that is, as implying that the subject is the only entity (in the given context) to which the property may be ascribed

(Declerck 1986: 30). For example, Declerck claims that *John is a good player* implies that there are other good players besides John but that *John is the good player* implies that there is only one good player in the context, namely John. However, data such as (13) suggest that this analysis is not correct:

(13)   George Allen, a rancher from San Luis Valley, wearing a black cowboy hat and drinking a beer while waiting for Mr. Buchanan, described himself as a ''guy who gets up at 5:30 in the morning'' and was tired of paying taxes for social programs.

   ''The Washington special interest has gone too far'', Mr. Allen said. ''Buchanan is going to reverse all that. I'm the guy who is footing the bill, and I'm sick of it.'' (*New York Times*, 26 February 1996, p. A8)

George Allen, the subject of the copular sentence *I'm the guy who is footing the bill*, is not the only male paying taxes to support (what he sees as) special interests in Washington. It is also unlikely that he was the only one who fit the description *the guy who is footing the bill* even in the context of (13) (a political rally at which Pat Buchanan, a candidate for the US Presidency in 1996, was appearing). Rather, *the guy who is footing the bill* is more plausibly understood as a role, of which Allen (the subject, *I*) is one instantiation. The role implies the existence of a stereotypical taxpayer supporting the special interests in Washington, i.e., given any special interest group in Washington, we should always expect to find someone whose role it is to pay for them (at least, until Buchanan is elected President). In contrast, if Allen had chosen to describe himself with an indefinite description (e.g., *a guy, one of the guys*, etc.), he would have been portrayed as one taxpayer amongst others and the nuance of stereo-typicality would have been absent. Notice that in the context of (13), any number of speakers could have felicitously described themselves as *the guy who is footing the bill*—each would have been saying that he/she was, at the same time as George Allen, a value instantiating the role. An actual situation of this sort, where more than one value instantiates a single role in the same situation, is shown in (14), an interview between the talk show host David Letterman and Emmitt Smith, a well-known American professional football player:

(14)   DL: You're the man.
    ES: No, you're the man.
    DL: No, you're the man.
    ES: I'm the man sitting next to the man.
   (*The Late Show* with David Letterman, CBS television, 13 September 1994)

Each occurrence of *the man* in (14) represents a special colloquial use of this expression (*You da man!*). It is used to refer to the man most worthy of great respect in any situation. In the last turn of this example, Smith states that both he and Letterman are values of the role "da man". In other words, rather than arguing further, they agree that although only one person can usually be "da man", in this situation, they are both worthy of instantiating the role. The analysis of these definite descriptions as roles predicts the occurrence of such cases since multiple instantiations typify roles in general.

Many definite descriptions are used to refer to roles that can be uniquely identified (e.g., *The president, the big mistake* in [12], *the guy who is footing the bill* in [13]), either because they are part of the larger situation set (e.g., *The president*) or because they can be inferred from knowledge of a previously evoked frame (they are members of the frame's association set, e.g., *the big mistake* in [12] is part of the boxing match frame). But, crucially, unique identifiability is not necessary for felicitous use of a role description with *the*, as seen in (15):

(15)   Researchers who reported in July that family history appeared to play a slightly smaller role in breast cancer than previously believed backed off, saying they had erred … "We took the wrong number and multiplied it by the wrong number", said Dr. Graham A. Colditz, a co-author of the study. (*Los Angeles Times*, 7 October 1993, p. A20)[15]

Both occurrences of *the wrong number* represent (non-unique) roles in the frame evoked by the previously mentioned verb *multiplied*. These roles are accessible entities because, although we do not know the values of the roles in this specific case, we do know that any multiplication problem stereotypically involves slots for two numbers.[16] Another important point is that frame-based definite role descriptions, such as the ones in (15), can be used in contexts in which more than one individual fits the descriptive content of the NP—i.e., in which more than one potential value of the role is available—just as long as the exact identity of the individual the speaker has in mind does not matter to the addressee (see Du Bois 1980: 233). And in (15), the speaker, Colditz, can reasonably assume that the exact identity of the numbers that were multiplied makes no difference to his audience.[17]

It is especially noteworthy that the roles designated by NPs with *the* do not have to constitute previously shared knowledge, i.e., they need not be part of the general background knowledge shared by members of a speech community (they do not necessarily rely on stereotypes). Instead, the definite article itself can be used to indicate that a referent is being entered

into the discourse as a role, to enable the speaker to achieve some particular rhetorical goal in a specific context. Speakers commonly employ *the* to bring ad hoc roles into existence. An illustration of this possibility is given in (16):

(16)   Conservatives never really liked or trusted Nixon the way they did, say, Ronald Reagan. And many liberals already feel disappointed, if not betrayed, by Clinton. But there is more to the distrust than ideology. A lot of it is purely personal. With Nixon, the joke was, "Would you buy a used car from this man?" With Clinton, it's endless variations on, "I didn't inhale". (*Los Angeles Times*, 1 May 1994, p. M6)

The NP *the joke* instructs readers to create a brand new role in the frame that we stereotypically associate with presidents, something to the effect of "standard joke about the current President". This role is set up by the journalist—for the purposes of this context only—as a means of relating Clinton and Nixon, in order to highlight certain similarities between them (the personal animosities against both). The role conveys the idea that there is a single joke saliently associated with each American president. The content of the joke (i.e., the value of the role) varies from one president to the next. For instance, the value associated with Nixon is identified in (16) as *Would you buy a used car from this man?* The value associated with Clinton is *I didn't inhale*. However, this role is not actually a part of the "president frame" in American culture. While people undoubtedly tell many jokes about any president, no single joke is consistently and stereotypically associated with each president. If this were so, then the evocation of a president's name should automatically activate knowledge of the standard joke linked to that president. That does not routinely happen, though, which explains why any sentence of the form *We were talking about President X when somebody told the joke* is odd.

Speakers often set up manifestly fictitious roles with *the* in order to achieve rhetorical goals, as shown again in (17), where World Cup soccer is being compared to movie comedies as popular entertainment. The sportswriter is able to extend the comparison by employing the definite article in the NP *the guy* to invent a novel role, "lone male creator of forms of popular entertainment" (such as movies), which is supposed to be an element in the "popular entertainment frame":

(17)   I never thought I'd live to say this, but I've grown to love World Cup soccer.
          It's as deliciously wacky as a Keystone Kops movie. The Marx Brothers have a ball. Everything but the pie in the face. What they used to call in Carole Lombard's day screwball comedy.

You watch the World Cup and you figure the guy got the idea
for it from "Alice in Wonderland".
Get a load of these guys! I ask you, was Chaplin ever funnier?
(*Los Angeles Times*, 10 July 1994, p. C1)

The novel role in this passage is explicitly assigned a value for World Cup
soccer (the guy who got the idea for the World Cup). However, it is
highly improbable that such an individual actually exists and, in any
case, his individual identity is of little importance here. More relevant to
the interpretation of this discourse than any value reading of *the guy*
is the role reading, which further develops the comparison of movies
and World Cup soccer by implying that this individual inventor of
World Cup soccer has a counterpart corresponding to each form of
popular entertainment, including movie comedies. The use of *the* (as
opposed to, say, *a guy*, which would not refer to the role and thus would
not evoke the existence of any counterpart elements) helps strengthen the
writer's overall argument that World Cup soccer is great entertainment
because those movie comedies are obviously highly entertaining.

The data in this section show that the definite article can be used to help
establish role functions. These roles may be uniquely identifiable entities,
but this is not necessary, as seen in examples (15) to (17). In each case,
though, the roles represent accessible information (with a low degree of
accessibility). Often, the discourse referents of role NPs are accessible—
and identifiable, too—because they are part of generally shared back-
ground knowledge within a speech community (part of the larger situation
set or an association set). Sometimes, they are accessible solely because
they can be linked to frames by connections that are constructed, on
the fly, in specific discourse contexts (as in [16] and [17]). The article usage
in the latter cases is especially creative, for two reasons. First, the
definite articles themselves bring these roles into existence, i.e., they
prompt the addressee to construct the discourse referent under the guise
of a role (rather than an individual value). Second, the articles do not
merely serve to access the speech act participants' knowledge of pre-
existing stereotypical connections linking mental spaces. Instead, they
trigger the online construction of appropriate (novel) connections—access
paths—between spaces and the elements within the spaces.[18] For example,
the definite description *the joke* in (16), in combination with broader
contextual factors, instructs the addressee to enter the referent into the
discourse as a role, to set up that role in the space representing the
president frame, and to link the individual jokes (the values of the role)
to the role in the frame (in other words, to set up role–value connectors).
The accessible information in the context of (16) is the president frame

itself, which is available for the role to be set up in. Although this role does not stereotypically belong to this frame, the local context provides support for such a construal. Consequently, an access path can be constructed linking the role in the frame to its values in the current focus space. In sum, data such as these suggest that a definite article may be the trigger for a large amount of discourse constructional work. In section 4.4, we shall look again at the construction of complex access paths involving roles.

4.3. *Point of view*

Another important function of the definite article is to contribute to shifts in point of view. In the default case, all language is understood as reflecting the point of view of the speaker or writer. Other perspectives are possible, though, and all languages have a wide range of formal mechanisms for conveying distinct points of view, including the definite article. In this section, I shall present examples in which NPs with *the* indicate that a discourse referent is accessible from the noncanonical point of view of a third person, either a fictional narrator or a discourse protagonist.[19]

Literary theorists have often pointed out that definite descriptions in literary works may be used to refer to entities that have not been mentioned beforehand in the text. One purpose of this strategy, which is especially common in the opening sentences of novels or short stories, is to encourage readers to empathize with, or adopt the viewpoint of, the narrator:

it suggests that the first mention of a thing, event or person already presupposes familiarity; this is justified only if they are looked at from a point of view of a reflector-character [i.e., a narrator], but not from the reader's angle of vision. (Stanzel 1981: 11)

This use of *the* is illustrated by the opening sentence of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms:*[20]

(18)   In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains.

The referents of these NPs with *the* are identifiable only to the narrator of the story, not to readers. Similarly, unfamiliar uses of *the* in poetry, such as (8) in section 4.1, can be interpreted as indicators of the narrator's point of view, in addition to portraying an entity as discourse prominent. Another common, but slightly different, literary strategy employs the article to signal that a portion of text should be interpreted as reflecting

the point of view of a discourse protagonist. This can be illustrated by the opening sentence of Hemingway's short story "Big Two-Hearted River":[21]

(19)   <u>The train</u> went on up <u>the track</u> out of sight, around one of the hills of burnt timber. Nick sat down …

As Chafe (1984: 284) points out, "[t]here is evidently no point in asking with whom the knowledge of the train or the track was judged to be shared". These entities are identifiable only to Nick, not to readers. The definite articles in *the train* and *the track* have the function of indicating that this portion of the discourse represents the protagonist's (Nick's) point of view. This interpretation of the passage is favored by the pragmatic context of (19), in particular, the occurrence of definite descriptions in the first sentence whose referents are not accessible to the reader plus the immediate mention of Nick at the beginning of the second sentence. In mental spaces terms, the articles prompt the reader to set up an alternate base space N, representing the reality of the character Nick. Since any base space represents a conceptualizer, N is a potential viewpoint space. Space N is embedded under the base space B, which represents the world of the story (by convention, the default reference point for a fictional text). The entities introduced in the first sentence of (19) (*the train*, *the track*, *the hills*, etc.) are set up in N, rather than B, because they are part of Nick's perceptions. The articles prompt a shift in viewpoint from B to N because at this point in the discourse, access to these entities is restricted to space N—Nick is the only one who knows about them. By default, we assume that Nick's perceptions are correct, so the elements in N also have counterparts in B because these entities exist in the world of the story (unless there are indications to the contrary, we assume they are not just figments of the character's imagination). The resulting space configuration is shown in Figure 3.
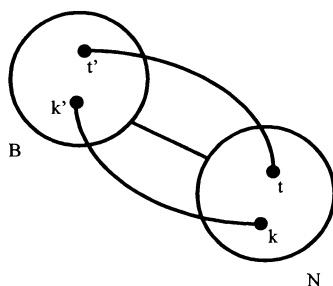

Figure 3.   *Point-of-view shift in example (19)*

The use of the definite article to convey a shift to a noncanonical point of view, for instance, that of a third person, is not limited to literary texts. Example (1b) in section 2 and the following examples, (20) and (21), come from newspaper texts. In (1b), the article in the NP *the Indians* signals that this entity is accessible from the perspective of the discourse protagonist, Richard Alexander (as indicated, too, by the fact that Alexander is the subject of the verb *thought*). Furthermore, although in the preceding examples *the* implies a noncanonical point of view when at the very beginning of a text, such uses of the article are not restricted to that environment, as shown in both (20) and (21). In these examples, *the* contributes towards shifts in which the point of view changes from the journalist's perspective to that of a discourse protagonist. The example in (20) is taken from a passage about a man who went back to his burning house to retrieve an old blanket:

(20)   Sierra Madre resident Andy Dotson might not have needed to breach security barricades to return to his threatened home. He had forgotten his tattered, 19-year-old blanket with <u>the distinctive penguin design</u>.
      "The kids and the animals are my security blanket, they come first", he said. "But my family didn't get [the blanket], so I went back there. It means something to me. I was gonna bust through the barricades if I had to … (*Los Angeles Times*, 30 October 1993, p. A10)

Just as in (19), readers cannot be expected to share knowledge of the entity introduced by this definite description, *the distinctive penguin design*. Instead, the article in (20) functions as a clue that the blanket is being characterized from the point of view of Andy Dotson. In particular, Dotson is the one responsible for the subjective evaluation of the penguin design as *distinctive*. By comparison, if the indefinite article were substituted for the definite in this context (*a distinctive penguin design*), readers would be likely to understand that the writer of the passage—the default point of view—is the source of this subjective evaluation, since the indefinite conveys inaccessibility (and while the blanket is not necessarily accessible from the writer's perspective, it must be accessible to Dotson).

In any context, of course, the definite article need not be the lone formal indication of a noncanonical point of view. Several lexical and/or grammatical items, including *the*, may all contribute towards establishing a particular perspective. Consider the discourse in (21), an excerpt from

a news report several days after the crash of TWA Flight 800 off the coast of Long Island:

(21)   Only four days ago, Michael O'Reilly was just a regular guy … But that was before Wednesday night, when he turned the ignition on a boat that was built for pleasure and headed out into the Atlantic Ocean, with hopeful expectation of finding survivors of a small airplane crash.

    Instead, he was among the first to bear witness to international tragedy. He returned to shore with three bodies lying across his rear deck and many images seared in his memory, images that should never slip through the seal of nightmare: <u>the fire on black and still waters, the bobbing sections of airplane silver</u>, suitcases floating past, <u>the ghostly white bodies</u>. Especially, that body of a child. (*New York Times*, 22 July 1996, p. B6)

It is evident from the lexical choices made by the writer of (21) (*images seared in his memory*) that the images described at the end of the passage are the perceptions of Michael O'Reilly. The definite articles are not primarily responsible—or even necessary—for conveying this shift in perspective, as shown by the fact that although no article is explicitly present in the NP *suitcases floating past*, the referent of this NP is nonetheless introduced from O'Reilly's point of view. Still, the articles are available to explicitly signal that the entities *the fire on black and still waters, the bobbing sections of airplane silver, and the ghostly white bodies* are accessible to O'Reilly (as is the demonstrative in *that body of a child*). Furthermore, the contrast between the different determiners in this context serves an additional function. Because a definite article marks, in general, a higher degree of accessibility than a zero determiner, the NPs with *the* at the end of (21) suggest that these images stand out more graphically— these mental entities are easier to activate—in O'Reilly's memory than the image of the suitcases. Demonstratives, in turn, mark a still higher degree of accessibility than NPs with *the*, so the use of *that* in *that body of a child*, in combination with *especially*, suggests that the image of the child's body is the most graphic of all (the most highly accessible) for O'Reilly.

    The data in this section show that felicitous use of *the* does not always rest on an assumption by the speaker that the referent of a definite description is accessible to the addressee. Sometimes the referent is accessible solely from the noncanonical point of view of a third person, i.e., the article indicates that an access path must be constructed to a mental space representing a third person's reality. In these cases, different kinds of grammatical, lexical, and pragmatic information work

in concert to effect a shift in viewpoint. The new viewpoint space associated with this third person may be of various sorts: a belief space, a speech/thought space (as in [1b], where the new space is set up by the explicit space builder *thought*), an alternate base representing the third person's consciousness (as in [19]), etc. The definite article itself may be chiefly responsible for setting up the viewpoint space (as in example [19]), or the space may be set up by other elements of the discourse context, e.g., an expression such as *images seared in his memory* (see [21]). In all of these cases, though, the article indicates that the discourse entity is introduced into this space and that it is accessible from there.

4.4. *Underspecification and definiteness*

As mentioned previously, the definite article itself indicates only that the referent of the NP in which *the* occurs should be processed as accessible information (more specifically, with a relatively low degree of accessibility). The exact interpretation of any definite description—the particular point of view, whether the NP designates a uniquely identifiable referent, or one that is discourse prominent, or a role, or some combination of these (see note 10)—is not specified by the grammar but must rather be determined in context. In mental spaces terminology, the definite article signals the availability of an access path, but the exact nature of the path is underspecified. More than one mental space configuration may be compatible with a sentence, in which case more than one interpretation can be constructed for that sentence. In this section, I take a detailed look at a particularly interesting piece of data in order to show how the approach adopted in this article can illuminate the complexities of article usage.

The example to be considered involves a definite description that can be interpreted in several ways, i.e., the description is compatible with several distinct access paths. Each path (corresponding to a distinct interpretation) arises because the article is able to trigger the construction of different mental spaces and transpatial connections, according to how the description is read in its context. It is important to point out that the mental space approach, unlike approaches based on unique identifiability or familiarity, predicts the existence of cases in which a single definite description may receive multiple readings, even in the absence of corresponding structural ambiguities, because the different readings stem from the availability of distinct accessing strategies (note that there are no structural ambiguities in the sentence containing *the* that we shall analyze below). Let us turn, then, to the example in question, (22), which

is taken from a review of the film *Genesis* (1986) by the Indian director Mrinal Sen:

(22)   The film's setting and the story both have a mythic simplicity. In the aftermath of a drought that leaves most people surviving by selling themselves into lifelong servitude, a farmer and a weaver escape and set up residence in a desert ghost town. Their only contact with the outside world is a trader who keeps them in debt to him while also keeping them supplied with essentials.

   Then the woman arrives, like a fleeing animal. Her family has been killed in a flood. She doesn't ask to stay, but they feel guilty after they rebuff her ("our first sin", they call it) and invite her to share their refuge … And so begins the slow spiral toward a disaster as ineluctable, no doubt, as the eternal cycles of drought and flood. (*Spectator*, Raleigh, NC, 14 February 1996, pp. 11–12)

In informal interviews, informants reported several potential readings of this passage (none of the informants had seen the film). The first involves an interpretation in which the NP *the woman* represents an individual who is discourse prominent, i.e., an entity that will be highly topical over the next stretch of discourse. This reading arises in the following manner. The passage begins by setting up a mental space F representing the story world of the film (the expression *The film's setting and the story* serves as a space builder here). The reviewer introduces a number of elements and relations into this space, including the various characters, the setting of the ghost town, the drought, etc. At the start of the second paragraph of (22), *the woman* introduces a new element w into F. Given that all the specific events of the film have been related so far in the review with present tense verbs, the present tense verb in the clause *Then the woman arrives*, along with the highly detailed description of the circumstances of her arrival in the following context, suggest that this new element w should be set up in F as a specific individual (see Figure 4). The occurrence of *the*, in a NP designating new information at the beginning of a new narrative episode, is interpreted as an indication that the woman—although she has not previously been mentioned—is likely to be mentioned again as the discourse evolves (cf. section 4.1). In other words, the reader infers from
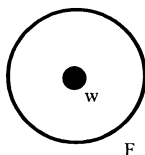

Figure 4.   *Prominence reading of* the woman *in example (22)*

the presence of *the* that the reviewer intends to suggest that the woman plays an important part in the film and that this will be the main topic of discussion in the paragraph to follow. If so, the reader will first construct the element w under the guise of a highly prominent discourse referent (represented graphically in Figure 4 by a large dot), and will then anticipate further references to the woman and eventual clarification of the reasons for her prominent status. This reading of high topicality turns out to be a plausible one in light of the recurring mentions of the referent in the subsequent context.

Under a second possible interpretation of (22), *the woman* represents not an individual but a role, namely, the role of the woman who typically arrives in paradise and is responsible for man's fall from grace. In this reading, *the woman* once again begins by introducing the new element w into space F. Next, an important contextual clue towards the construction of the access path is supplied by the title of the film, *Genesis*, which activates a mental space G containing our knowledge of the Genesis story from the Bible. If structural similarities are perceived between the contents of F and G, an analogical mapping may be set up between the two spaces and conceptual connections constructed between specific elements and relations in each one. In particular, a connection is constructed between the woman w in F and her counterpart e in G, representing the biblical Eve. The structure shared by the two spaces, especially the presence of the woman in each, along with general cultural background knowledge of creation stories, contributes to the evocation of a third, generic-level space C, the "creation story frame". This space C contains the roles and relations common to both F and G, including, most importantly, the role r representing the woman who *stereotypically* arrives in a mythical paradise and causes the downfall of the male inhabitant(s) there. The analogy between F and G, plus background knowledge of C, now make clear that the woman in the film and Eve are not just isolated instances of the category "woman". Instead, they are both individual values instantiating the role r. Therefore, the crucial step in this interpretation of (22) can take place—a role–value connector is set up linking r in space C to w in space F (as well as a connector linking r to e in space G), which provides the access path needed for the interpretation of w (see Figure 5). Thus, the choice of *the* in this case explicitly sets up an element w in F and implicitly prompts the activation of the frame C—which contains the role r—and the construction of an access path from w to r. The role in (22) is accessed indirectly through the introduction of one of its values.[22]

Of course, there is nothing to prevent a third possible reading, one in which the two previous interpretations are in effect combined; that is,
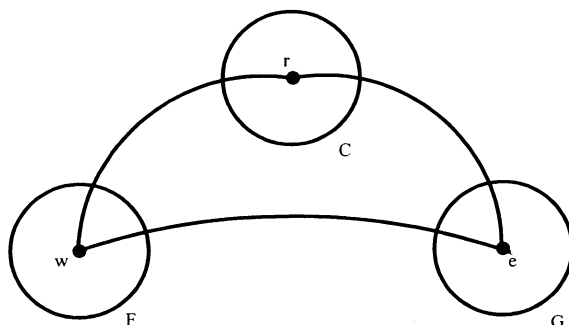
Figure 5.   *Role reading of* the woman *in example (22)*

the woman is read as a role that is simultaneously discourse prominent. Finally, some informants that I have interviewed concerning this passage report that they interpreted *the woman* as a role (i.e., a stereotypical woman whom one generally expects to appear in such situations) even though they did not notice the analogy between this woman and Eve or the analogy between the story in the film and the Genesis story (understandably so, since neither Eve nor the book of Genesis are explicitly mentioned anywhere in the context surrounding the NP *the woman*). These readers will arrive at a slightly different interpretation of (22) than the one described in the previous paragraph because they are not accessing space G. Instead, they infer the role reading solely from the presence of the definite article in this context. They must construct their own ad hoc equivalent of the generic-level space C, complete with the role *r*, which can then be linked to *w* in F. This access path points to an ad hoc role in an ad hoc space, constructed on line solely for the purpose of interpreting (22).[23] Readers are motivated to carry out this discourse constructional effort because the definite article is taken to be a "guarantee" on the part of the speaker that such an effort will result in an appropriate interpretation (see Kempson 1986). In contrast, the access path described in the previous paragraph differs in that it points to an element (the role *r*) in a space (the creation story frame C) which is part of widely shared background knowledge existing independently of the discourse in (22).

Under all the interpretations described in this section, the NP *the woman* represents accessible information. But definite descriptions, in general, do not specify precisely how the described entity is to be accessed: in which mental space it should be set up; under which guise it should be constructed (prominent or not, a role or a value?); to which other spaces and elements it should be linked; from which viewpoint it is to be accessed. Hence, the various interpretations of (22) arise from the fact that

several different mental space configurations—including different access paths—can be constructed in the context of this particular definite description. While (22) may be somewhat unusual in the amount of inferential work required of readers to determine how *the woman* fits into its context, it is nonetheless representative (and highly revealing) of the types of cognitive activity triggered by the definite article.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have presented the basic elements needed for a unified analysis of the definite article in English, arguing that the article is, in all of its uses, a marker of low accessibility. It is essentially a discourse processing instruction signaling that the means for interpreting the NP in which it occurs is available somewhere in the configuration of mental spaces, as long as the appropriate spaces, elements and connections—i.e., access path—can be constructed by the addressee. Some of the functions fulfilled by *the* are: unique identifiability, prominence, role/value status, point-of-view shifts. Each function represents a conventional inter-pretation potentially associated with a definite description. However, none of these functions is specifically conveyed by the article itself. Instead, the interpretation of a given definite description arises in a particular context through a combination of lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic factors.

The approach presented here entails a more dynamic view of definite-ness than previous approaches. It focuses on the ways speakers employ the article to achieve specific communicative goals in local discourse contexts. As such, it is a relatively *speaker-oriented* approach, in contrast to the more *hearer-oriented* approach adopted in other work (the term "hearer orientation" comes from Hawkins [1978: 97]). Hearer-oriented approaches emphasize that felicitous use of *the* depends not only on the speaker's referential intent but also, crucially, on the speaker's assessment of the hearer's knowledge of the referent. They maintain that if the speaker believes the hearer cannot identify the referent, then *the* should not be selected. From this perspective, there is a sense in which the choice of article is basically a response on the part of the speaker to the hearer's presumed knowledge (the latter being the primary determining factor). However, the data presented in this article demonstrate that speakers do not simply choose articles in a relatively passive way, responding chiefly to what they think hearers know. For instance, we have seen that speakers often choose *the* even when they know that the hearer is not yet able to pick out the referent in question. These data suggest that article selection is an aspect of the active, dynamic process of referent construction, in

which speakers construct discourse referents in such a way as to induce hearers to accept the referents into the discourse under distinct guises (to further their own communicative purposes). While the hearer's knowledge is of course highly relevant to the choice of article, it is but one factor that the speaker will take into consideration.

Naturally, more work remains to be done before a complete account of the meaning and distribution of the definite article in English will have been achieved. In particular, just as the concepts of unique identifiability and familiarity need to be made clearer (see section 2), sharper definitions of notions such as (low) accessibility and prominence must eventually be worked out, too, and procedures need to be developed (through psycholinguistic testing) that will allow us to independently measure all of these notions. Nevertheless, I suggest than an approach based on the concept of accessibility is worth pursuing because it possesses an advantage over previous approaches (which researchers concede do not satisfactorily account for all the data; see note 2)—it holds the promise of providing a more comprehensive theory of the article. The framework described in this article is intended as a first step in laying the foundation for a unified account of all uses of the definite article.

Notes

*   I would like to thank Mira Ariel, Aintzane Doiz-Bienzobas, Gilles Fauconnier, and an anonymous *Cognitive Linguistics* referee for their insightful and very helpful comments on previous drafts of the manuscript. I am solely responsible, however, for any errors that remain. An earlier, slightly different version of this article appeared as Epstein (2001). Author's e-mail address: < repstein@crab.rutgers.edu >.

1.   A summary of older work on definite articles and the very wide array of terms—determinedness, individualization, concretization, actualization, specialization, particularization, etc.—that have been used to define the meaning of *the* can be found in Krámský (1972: 18–29).

2.   In addition, see Du Bois (1980: 208): "it is not in fact possible to specify a single function of the definite article which will apply in all areas of English grammar", and Poesio and Vieira (1998: 189): "Neither the uniqueness nor the familiarity approach have yet succeeded in providing a satisfactory account of all uses of definite descriptions", and also Lyons (1999: 274): "no one has shown conclusively that a version or mutation of either identifiability [i.e., familiarity] or inclusiveness [i.e., uniqueness] accounts adequately for all definite uses".

3.   Similar typologies, though with differing terminology, can be traced back at least to Christophersen (1939).

4. A number of objections to the familiarity theory have already been raised. See, for example, Abbott (1999); Fraurud (1990); Hawkins (1991: 415); Löbner (1985: 291, 320–321). Birner and Ward (1994) argue that familiarity provides neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for felicitous use of *the*.

5. McCawley (1979) claims that the interpretation of definite descriptions relates to a hierarchically structured "contextual domain". Hawkins (1991) talks about "pragmatic sets", or "P-sets"; some of Hawkins's P-sets were described in section 2, e.g., the previous discourse set, the larger situation set, etc. Both McCawley and Hawkins, however, only discuss the way these sets help determine uniqueness.

6. The analysis presented here is adapted from Sweetser and Fauconnier (1996: 13–14). Sentences such as the ones in (3) originally come from Jackendoff (1975).

7. Degree of richness of information is inversely correlated with degree of accessibility (Ariel 1990; Givón 1983). Thus, rich definite descriptions (e.g., *The first woman selected to be on the team of an American spaceship*) are associated with discourse entities of very low accessibility, descriptions of the type *the*+N are associated with somewhat more accessible entities, and pronouns—which, by themselves convey a very lean informational content—are associated with highly accessible entities (Ariel 1990: 34).

8. Except, perhaps, for NPs such as *the richest man in America*, which can be appropriately interpreted solely on the basis of the information provided in the NP.

9. As Mira Ariel (p.c.) has pointed out, we ought to analyze these nonactive (new) discourse referents in the same way as already active (though not highly accessible) discourse referents because languages consistently code these seemingly distinct sorts of referents in the same formal fashion, e.g., English codes both with definite articles.

10. The article may serve other functions, as well. For instance, Vonk, Hustinx, and Simons (1992) argue that anaphoric expressions can be used to signal thematic shifts, while Maes and Noordman (1995) argue that referential expressions have a predicating function. Furthermore, it should be emphasized that the different functions are not mutually exclusive. A definite description may fulfill more than one of these functions at the same time (see also Maes and Noordman 1995: 274). For instance, many uniquely identifiable referents are also discourse prominent, roles are frequently identifiable (see section 4.2), a NP with *the* whose referent is portrayed as discourse prominent may also indicate that the referent is being introduced into the discourse from a noncanonical point of view (as is the case in examples [1b], [6], and [8]). Generally speaking, prominence is closely related to point of view, since a discourse entity can only be construed as prominent from some conceptualizer's perspective. On the other hand, discourse entities introduced from a noncanonical point of view need not be construed as discourse prominent. I therefore treat discourse prominence (section 4.1) and point of view (section 4.3) as distinct functions of *the*.

11. I would like to thank Mira Ariel for referring me to Morgan (1978).

12. I would like to thank Ritva Laury for bringing this example to my attention.

13. Epstein (1994: 72) analyzes another example in which an initial-mention definite description sounds more natural than a corresponding indefinite, even though the referent of the NP is not uniquely identifiable (it is, however, manifestly intended to be a new topic). In this example, an item in a newspaper begins with the following sentence: *When the Northridge quake struck, the woman was terrified*. Unlike the definite *the woman*, the indefinite *a woman* would be strange in this sentence because it conveys little relevant information. Similarly, Perlmutter (1970: 238) notes that the indefinite in *A boy is tall* is ungrammatical; Lambrecht (1994: 167) also explains the unacceptability of this indefinite in terms of its lack of informativeness: "it is difficult to imagine a context in which it would be informative to predicate tallness of an

unidentified subject referent. Such sentences violate the most elementary condition of relevance".

14. This occurrence of *the big mistake* represents the first introduction of this discourse referent into the context of (12), so it should not be read as referring back to a big mistake that has already been talked about.

15. I would like to thank Gilles Fauconnier for bringing this example to my attention.

16. For more on the importance of stereotypes in associative anaphora, see Prince (1978), Kleiber (1993).

17. Epstein (2000) argues that, similar to (15), the definite descriptions in sentences such as *A dog bit me on the finger, Johnny wrote on the living-room wall*, are frame-based role NPs. Even though these NPs evoke non-unique individuals (I have five fingers, rooms have four walls), they are felicitous as long as the identity of the precise individual value of the role in question (finger or wall) does not matter to the addressee.

18. In this sense, the roles introduced in (16) and (17) are not uniquely identifiable entities because all grounds for definiteness (see section 2) are lacking—no previously shared background knowledge of these entities is available, nor can their presence be inferred on the basis of stereotypical connections to frames. In the terms of Lewis (1979) and Heim (1982), they must simply be "accommodated" into the discourse.

19. Sanders and Redeker (1996: 303–305) propose a related analysis of point-of-view shifts with indefinite NPs, which are, in a sense, the reverse case of the examples analyzed in this section.

20. My analysis of (18) follows Gibson (1966: 28–41) and Ong (1975: 12–15), both of whom provide detailed discussions of the articles in the entire opening passage of *A Farewell to Arms* (though employing somewhat different terminology from mine).

21. This analysis is based on Chafe (1994: 250–251, 283–284).

22. In contrast, use of the indefinite article (*a woman*) in (22) would simply have served to introduce a new individual entity *w* into F. The indefinite article does not trigger the construction of links to other spaces because it is a signal that the entity is not accessible.

23. Interpreted this way, the role in (22) is similar to the ad hoc role of *the guy* in (17), which is also constructed solely for a specific purpose in a local discourse context.

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