An examination of the differences between simple definite and indefinite noun phrases.

Daryl Sherriff

This paper examines different approaches to the question of how simple definite and indefinite noun phrases of the form 'the car' and 'a car' function in the language. It questions the traditional and indeed currently prevalent view that these noun phrases both have a referential function, and argues instead that definite and indefinite phrases, while functioning specifically, actually perform quite distinct but separate roles in the language. The paper argues that one chief function of simple definite noun phrases is to refer while the central role of simple indefinite noun phrases is to define.

It is further argued that there is no passive understanding of definite noun phrases because every use of such a noun phrase must be taken by the hearer / listener to select out a noun-specific item introduced at some point in the discourse. The final part of the paper maintains that, since the relationship between a particular noun phrase and whatever it refers to, is contingent, taking noun phrases requires work. The nature of this work might at first appear inconsequential or even trivial but is actually of some considerable importance.

Keywords : Articles, definite and indefinite noun phrases, inclusiveness, identifiability, defining, referring, specifying, 'take it'.

In what follows I want to examine the function of simple noun phrases that involve either the definite or the indefinite article. For so long now, phrases involving these articles have been interpreted as somehow opposites and, indeed, this much seems evident in the way they are characterized as either 'definite' or 'indefinite'. I do not wish to suggest that understanding what we mean by definiteness is not an important and valuable undertaking. It most certainly is, but what is more important is to be very sure that this is the crux of the difference between the function of so-called 'definite' and 'indefinite' noun phrases.

Explanations and counter-explanations have abounded over the last hundred years or more, going back well beyond the work of Frege, Russell and others. The fact that they continue to abound today bears testimony not only to the lack of any real agreement as to the function of these phrases[1] but also to the fact that study into them has taken place in a variety of disciplines at completely different times. For example, issues that were brought to light by both Frege and Russell quite some time ago are only recently being considered by modern grammarians and linguists.

Notwithstanding all of this Lyons (1999) poses the question I would like to discuss in a way that many would find both acceptable and readily understandable. He asks : "What is the difference in meaning between *the car* and *a car*, between *the greedy child* and *a greedy child*, between *the hibiscus I planted last summer* and *a hibiscus I planted last summer*? Many traditional grammars would give answers like the following : *The* indicates that the speaker or writer is referring to a definite or particular car etc., not just any. But apart from being rather vague, this answer is quite in-

---

[1] Since I am writing this in Japan, before I begin, I would like to ask you to spare a thought for all those students of English here whose first introduction to the definite article is often a bare sentence of the following kind :

(1) The cat drank the milk.

Completely in the absence of a context of any kind they are told that 'the cat' refers to some particular cat. Just what cat that might be, and why on earth someone should write the sentence on the board when no cats are present or have been previously mentioned is difficult to imagine. The students problems are compounded when the next sentence written on the board is :

(2) A cat drank the milk.

They are then asked to try to understand the difference between definite and indefinite article use on the basis of these two examples, or examples like them. Many of them never recover from such introductions and definite article usage, or more correctly, the use of simple definite noun phrases eludes them for the rest of their lives. This all the more behooves us to come up with a coherent explanation of what it is that those speakers of, in the first instance, English, have understood in being able to use phrases involving both articles effortlessly.

accurate. If I say *I bought a car this morning*, I am not referring to just any car ; the car I bought is a particular one, and is distinguished in my mind from all others. Yet *a car* is indefinite. There is in fact no general agreement on what the correct answer is, but two major components of meaning have been much discussed.."[2]

While noting Lyons's comments about the provisional and tentative nature of what he has to say in the early stages, we should be aware at the outset that the particular way in which a problem is posed very often sets the ground rules for what is possible as a solution. In so far as there is no disagreement about the framing of the problem and minds move in a fairly harmonious way towards a solution, perhaps, all well and good. However, when the question has dragged on for a good number of years, as in the present case, and there appears to be nothing like a modicum of agreement as to the best solution, then time comes to question the way the problem has been posed and it becomes necessary to examine some of the assumptions implicit in its depiction.

Before outlining my misgivings about this particular way of posing the problem it may prove useful to examine the 2 major components of meaning Lyons refers to above as well as to look at some other contemporary approaches to the problem.

1.
Identifiability or Inclusiveness

According to Lyons, accounts of the function of the definite article generally fall into one of two broad camps. The first is based on *identifiability* while the second is based on *inclusiveness*, a term due to Hawkins (1978).

With regard to the first category, *identifiability*, Lyons says, "the idea is that the use of the definite article directs the hearer to the referent of the noun phrase by signaling that he is in a position to identify it."[3]

The second category, *inclusiveness*, means, "the reference is to the totality of the objects or mass in the context which satisfy the description."[4]

An example he offers to illustrate *identifiability* involves a woman called Ann in a sitting room trying to put a picture up on the wall. A man called Joe enters the room and without turning round, the woman, Ann, says to Joe :

(1) Pass me **the hammer**, will you?

"Joe looks around and, sure enough, sees a hammer on a chair. At the time of Ann's utterance Joe does not know that there is a hammer in the room. He has to look for a referent, guided by the description *hammer*. The definite article tells Joe that he can identify the hammer Ann is talking about, and the verb *pass* (which tends to take things immediately available as complement, by contrast with *fetch, get, buy*) makes it almost certain that he will find it in the room. The referent of the definite noun phrase is unfamiliar to the hearer, but he is able to find a referent for it."[5]

Turning now to *inclusiveness*, Lyons offers an example that initially looks problematic for anyone following the *identifiability* line. Consider the following example :

(2) I've just been to a wedding. **The bride** wore black.

According to Lyons the definite reference *the bride* in (2) is successful because the hearer knows that weddings involve brides, and makes the natural inference that the reference is to the bride at the particular wedding just mentioned. But he questions if the hearer identifies the referent in any real sense : " He still does not know who she is or anything about her. If asked later who got married that morning he would be in no position to say..and if he passes the newly-wed in the street the next

[2] Lyons, C. L, 1999, 2.
[3] Lyons, C. L, 1999, 5.
[4] Lyons, C. L, 1999, 11.
[5] Lyons, C. L, 1999, 6.

day he will not recognize her as the person referred to."[6]

Another example Lyons offers in this context is :

(3) [Nurse entering operating theatre]

I wonder who **the anaesthetist** is today.

"A definite is possible because we take it for granted that operations involve anaesthetists. But it is clear from what is said in (3) that the speaker cannot identify the referent of the noun phrase, and does not necessarily expect the hearer to be able to."

Example (3) above, like example (2) before it is difficult for the identifiability theory to account for because no concrete identification can be made in the two cases. The inclusiveness theory, however, has no problem with examples (2) and (3) since according to it reference is simply to the things in the context which satisfy the description, i.e. to whoever the bride and the anaesthetist are. Moreover, inclusiveness can also account for example (1) involving the hammer. For this example to work for the identifiability theory there must be only one hammer in question and this fact also guarantees that the definite noun phrase refers to the totality of objects — i.e. one — which satisfy the description.

Importantly, however, there are cases where identifiability works but inclusiveness does not. The following examples are due to Lyons (1999).[7]

(4) [In a room with three doors, one of which is open]

Close **the door**, please.

(5) [In a hallway where all four doors are closed. The speaker is dressed in coat and hat, and has a suitcase in each hand]

Open **the door** for me, please.

(6) [Ann, fixing her motorbike, is examining a large nut. Behind her, just out of reach, are three spanners, two of them obviously far too small for the nut]

Pass me **the spanner**, will you?

(7) [Two academics]

A : How did the seminar go?

B : Fine. **The student** gave an excellent presentation, which generated a really good discussion, with all the other students contributing well.

The analysis offered of these examples runs as follows.[8]

" In (4), an immediate situation use, the door referred to is not unique ; but it is easily identified because of the verb — you can only close an open door. (5) is similar ; the door is not unique, but the speaker's state of preparedness for a journey makes it obvious that the street door is meant. In (6) the hearer is expected to be able to work out that only one of the three spanners can possibly fit the bill and identify the intended referent. And in (7), the nature of a seminar makes it clear that one student in the group stood out as having a special task, and this individual will be taken to be the referent of **the student.** All these examples are perfectly normal uses of **the,** and they cannot adequately be accounted for by inclusiveness."

Examples 4 — 7 are, as it were, tailor made to cause difficulties for anyone pursuing the inclusiveness theory ; they are, in a sense, contrived and involve the hearer in a calculating exercise, albeit a very easy one. The hearer has to work out in cases 4, 5 and 6, which (concrete) thing is meant. The referent is actually cashed, i.e. actually identified. Other doors, or spanners, in the situation, which make life hard for the inclusiveness theorist, are ignored. Example 7 is somewhat different. The hearer has to bring to bear his knowledge about seminars and this enables him to take the noun phrase **the student** unambiguously. However, the referent in this case, has not been cashed in a similar way to examples 4, 5 and 6. Certainly, inclusiveness cannot account for this example but, at

[6] Lyons, C. L, 1999, 7.

[7] Lyons, C. L, 1999, 14.

[8] Lyons, C. L, 1999, 14.

bottom, how different is it from Lyons' earlier 'bride' example, an example, oddly enough, intro-
duced to cast doubt on the notion of identifiability.

Essentially, however, examples 4—7 have been presented with a view to defending the identifi-
ability theory. In contrast to this the earlier examples (2) and (3), by supporting inclusiveness,
sought to discredit the notion that identifiability could somehow explain the function of the noun
phrase in reference determination. And so it is that the battle for domination between these two
theories continues ; modification along the way serving only to extend a debate, which Lyons says,
is left ultimately unresolved.[9]

There may be disagreement about Lyons's conclusion here but the very possibility that he is right,
forces us to consider something that happens so frequently when we are involved in discussion, ar-
gument and analysis that we are apt to ignore it. We are so very often presented with an **either / or**
dialectic—A **or** B, and we arrange ourselves in one or other of the camps—(some perhaps look on
impartially, accepting the terms of the argument)—and then proceed to contrive examples that suit
our own case and challenge that of our opponent. This can generally bring useful insights so long as
we view it as a device for concentrating thought in certain directions ; the danger is that we become
attached and start to remain loyal to something of our own construction, to something of our own
making. The argument remains fixed in this framework and it becomes difficult to break away from
it ; we have, as it were, to side with one or the other. So, at some point we have to determine
whether the dialectical presentation of the issues as an either A or B scenario is really fundamental
to an explanation of the function of definite noun phrases.

With regard to the present discussion, and quite independent of the fact that two views—A and B,
as it were, are being propagated, two interesting items have emerged

In the case of example (2)—'I've just been to a wedding. **The bride** wore black', the speaker and
hearer are not in the presence of the bride. Admittedly, the speaker was in her presence earlier but
the hearer, we must assume was not. So this is a case in which the referent of the noun phrase is ab-
sent at the time of speaking. Similar things could be said about example (7) involving *the student.*

Turning now to example (4)—[In a room with three doors, one of which is open]

'Close **the door**, please', we have a situation in which the speaker hearer and the door in question
are in close physical proximity at the time the utterance is made. In other words, the referent of the
noun phrase is present at the time of speaking which made it possible for the hearer to seek it out
and obey the speaker's imperative.

Let us now add another example :

(8) A rather tall man accompanied by a longhaired woman came into the room. **The woman** was
carrying a large suitcase.

This type of example, often referred to as anaphoric **the** in the literature, has not been mentioned
so far because both of the 'theories' currently under consideration assume they are able to account
for it.

For our part, we now have a third item of information to add to the other two just introduced. In
(8) the noun phrase *the woman* somehow enables a link to be maintained to a person introduced ear-
lier in the discourse.

What we arrive at from these three related pieces of information is that there seem to be two cen-
tral aspects involved in talking about reference and definite noun phrases. Sometimes we actually
need to physically identify the person or thing in question in order to carry out a certain task. This is
especially true of obeying imperatives as in examples (4), (5) and (6). At a great many other times
when we come into contact with a definite noun phrase we either maintain a link, somehow, to
something introduced earlier, as in example (8), or we recognise a direct connection to a specific in-
dividual based on our knowledge of the ways of world, as in (2) and (7). But the fact that in some
cases we are able to physically identify the referent whilst in other cases we are not, need not neces-

---

[9] Lyons, C. L, 1999, 274.

sarily distort our perceptions about what referring actually is. It need not, as it were, push us in the direction of either the identifiability or the inclusiveness theorist.

The main point to emerge from all this is that on many occasions we do not need to isolate the particular thing being singled out in order to understand an utterance involving a definite noun phrase, even if we had the time, energy and inclination to do so. Before we look at the question of reference in greater detail it may prove illuminating to look at an explanation of the workings of the definite article from a slightly different perspective.

2.
The definite article : another perspective

In his book *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar Vol. 2,* Langacker outlines his treatment of the definite and indefinite articles. He tells us, first of all, that : "To characterize the definite article we need a construct that we can call the **current discourse space**. This mental space comprises those elements and relations construed as being shared by the speaker and hearer as a basis for communication at a given moment in the flow of discourse. More specifically, the entities that constitute the discourse space fall within what is understood to be the realm of current discussion and are immediately available to S and H, either figuring directly in their conscious awareness or being readily elicited (e.g. through association or simple inference)."[10]

A new space, we are told, may even be created as in (1) :

(1) Once upon a time, there was a beautiful princess who lived with an ugly frog in a castle overlooking a championship golf course.

As well as this we need to understand the notion of **mental contact** which is defined : " in terms of an entity being singled out for individual conscious awareness in the conceptualizer's current psychological state." This, we are told, is 'easily achieved' because the entity involved need not be real or referential and nothing specific need be known about it.

Hence "(1) brings the listener into mental contact with a princess, a frog, a castle, and a golf course, despite their sketchy description and presumption that they are imaginary."

For the moment let us simply note some of the difficulties that Langacker's way of talking generates without going into them too deeply. In the first instance one wonders what talk of entities and mental contact actually achieves. Surely sentence (1) is perfectly understandable as it stands without saying there is some mental entity corresponding to the words 'a princess', 'a frog', 'a castle', and 'a golf course', or even simply to the words 'princess', 'frog', 'castle' and 'golf course' for that matter. The problem becomes magnified when we consider both the speaker and hearer conceiving 'mental spaces' inhabited by a princess, a frog, a castle and a golf course. Since they are separate individuals it seems to follow that S and H can at best have 'mental contact' (whatever that might be) with certain 'entities' that inhabit the mental spaces they separately conceive. And since they are conceiving them separately these 'entities' must be different, or at the very least, can never be known to be the same.

Leaving this to one side however, it is at this point that Langacker attempts to characterize the meaning of the definite article. He does so thus : " use of the definite article with type description T in a nominal implies that (1) the designated instance t* of T is unique and maximal in relation to the current discourse space ; (2) S has mental contact with t* ; and (3) either H has mental contact with t* or the nominal alone is sufficient to establish it."

Langacker continues : " The basic import of *the* is that the speaker and hearer, *just by using the nominal it grounds* (my emphasis), establish mental contact with the *same* (my emphasis) instance t*."

He emphasizes this shortly afterwards by saying : "By the foregoing definition, then, nothing in

---

[10] Langacker, R, W. 1991, 97.

the clause containing a *the*-marked nominal is required for establishing coordinated mental contact with t* other than that nominal itself."

At this point we are given a concrete example. " Consider (3) :

(3) I bought a shirt and a belt, but the shirt was too small.

The use of *the* is proper in the second clause because the first clause has already brought a specific instance of *shirt* into the discourse and established it in the current awareness of S and H."[11]

When Langacker says : "The basic import of *the* is that the speaker and hearer, just by using the nominal it grounds, establish mental contact with the same instance of t*", conceptual worries aside, one is at first slightly bemused. It seems as if such contact must be magical and that rather than explaining what is happening, Langacker appears to be stipulating that these things just are, as it were, glued together. Perhaps, however, we can avoid some of the pitfalls of employing the technical terms that Langacker uses by looking more directly at example (3) *I bought a shirt and a belt, but the shirt was too small.*

Here we are told that because the first clause has already brought a specific instance of *shirt* into the discourse, and established it in the current awareness of S and H, then it is fine to use *the* in the second clause. And the suggestion is that this guarantees coordinated contact. This point has to be challenged on two fronts.

The first is to question the way that Langacker expresses himself and to do this we have to be clear how he uses 'instance'. For Langacker "**instances** are dealt with as conceptual entities".[12] The instance designated by the term, **the rabbit**, is not some animal existing in the world, or the extension of **rabbit** (the set of such objects) but is a conceptualization.

In this regard, the first clause of example (3) has used the word 'shirt' together with the indefinite article. Does this bring a specific instance of *shirt*, a sort of shirt 2 into the discourse? I hear the word 'shirt' and come into mental contact with an instance of *shirt*, something different and separate from that word? This 'instance' is established in the current awareness of S and H. Then, just by using 'the' in the second clause as part of a nominal construction S and H establish mental contact with the **same** instance of *shirt*?

Holding back genuine concerns about what such contact might be, one immediately asks how one could ever know that mental contact had been achieved. All we have to go on are the words that people use. Talk of 'instances' with regard to the indefinite and also with the definite article seems to make contact less likely, not more.

The second front on which we can challenge example (3) is by ignoring all the technical language and taking it simply as it stands. The use of the definite article as part of the nominal 'the shirt' is not enough to ensure coordination of contact because there is nothing in the two clauses, as they stand, that can be coordinated. To understand this point however we need to examine something that connects this section of the paper with the earlier section involving Lyons. Before looking at that however we will have a brief look at what first, Langacker, and then Lyons, have to say about the function of the indefinite article.

3.
The Indefinite Article

Langacker tells us that it is common to distinguish between a *specific* and a *non-specific* interpretation of the indefinite article. An example to illustrate this might be :

(X) Jim wants to buy a car.

Under the specific interpretation, Jim has a particular car in mind and on the non-specific reading — any car will do. One feature of this dichotomy is that only the specific use creates a "discourse refer-

[11] Langacker, R, W. 1991, 98.
[12] Langacker, R, W. 1991, 55.

ent" that can be referred to anaphorically. For example, (X) might be continued by saying, " It is red, has 4 doors and has great acceleration". The idea would be that "It" refers back to *a car* and, as a result *a car* must be seen as being specific.

Langacker wishes to dissociate himself from this view in some small way and we shall later come to look at his view in more detail but, for the moment, must note several misgivings of our own.

The first thing to note is that the explanation above, which has a fairly well established tradition within linguistics, talks of two interpretations of the *indefinite article*, reinforcing the idea that it alone is responsible for any ambiguity that might arise.

However, if (X) is compatible with situations which have different interpretations, as it does indeed appear to be, we have to be very clear that they cannot be interpretations of the article alone but must be interpretations of the whole *sentence*, and possibly more. In particular, (X) contains the verb *want* and it is here where our sense of ambiguity lies since it is 'wanting' itself that admits of more or less specificity with regard to its object. It is with the verb *want* in conjunction with the infinitive *to buy* that we must locate the equivocalness. It is because a person can *want to buy* something particular, or simply *want* any example of a particular kind that gives rise to the ambivalent readings of (X). In our earlier example 'I bought a car', we were not given to speculate different interpretations because unlike *want*, *buy*, used in an unmodified sense in the past tense indicates a completed purchase, a completed action.

Understanding these sentences involves grasping their overall meanings, and in doing so we are able to locate ambiguity if and when it arises. In the case of (X) above this involves locating it essentially in the verb phrase 'want' and not in the indefinite noun phrase. As we noticed earlier, and as we shall observe again later, understanding <u>semantic meaning</u> is fundamental to any inquiry into how language works.

This aside however, there are other reasons to take issue with the account of specific and non — specific interpretations presented above. These relate to assertions about reference. If we follow (X), above, with the sentence, 'It is red, has 4 doors and has great acceleration', it is generally accepted that 'It' is anaphoric on the term 'a car' in the earlier sentence. What this reduces to is saying that 'It' and 'a car' both refer, and moreover, refer to the same thing.

And, of course, there is an appeal to such an analysis. It seems to enable us to use terms like pronouns in a back-referring capacity. What we are essentially doing is substituting one term for another, in the current case 'It' for 'a car', and in doing so preserving reference to the self-same thing. Making links between sentences or simple bits of information is then simply a matter of substituting one term for another with the same reference.

Whilst strongly objecting to such a position we must ask how far Langacker is a victim of this view. Initially at least, as already mentioned, he wishes to distance himself a little from the *specific / non-specific* interpretation of the indefinite article. He writes : "The analysis I propose represents a slight refinement of this standard account : a single meaning accommodates both the specific and the non-specific uses of the indefinite article, and either use is capable of establishing a discourse referent."

In so far as Langacker is saying that there are not specific and non-specific interpretations of the indefinite article, he stands in accord with the view being put forward in this paper. This, of course, still leaves us able to talk about different interpretations of the sentence, however, even if reading it in one way rather than another necessitates considering outside information.

Langacker continues : " I am essentially paraphrasing Hawkins (1978) in stating that the indefinite article contrasts with the definite in regard to uniqueness : the former implies that the nominal alone is *not* sufficient to put the hearer in mental contact with a uniquely determined instance of this category. Thus, if you and I are working on a car and there are several wrenches lying about, I can perfectly well say *Hand me a wrench!* — but hardly *Hand me the wrench!* — because there are multiple instances of *wrench* in the current discourse space defined by our immediate physical circumstances. The opposite would of course be true if there were only one wrench at our disposal.

The basic analysis, then, is that *a* profiles a discrete thing (a schematically characterized bounded region) and indicates that, while the nominal it grounds does establish mental contact between H and an instance t* of T, the nominal itself does not render t* unique in relation to the current discourse space."[13]

The first thing to note is that for Langacker the issue with regard to the definite and the indefinite article revolves around whether or not the use of the nominal puts the hearer in 'mental contact' with a uniquely determined instance of the category in question. In the case of a nominal used with the indefinite article, 'mental contact' is established with an instance of the appropriate type but not one that is unique in the context under consideration.

As in the last section one immediately asks what it is to make 'mental contact' with an instance of something like *wrench*, which we must not forget is not one of the physical objects lying about in the example above, but a conception, something altogether different. Moreover, it is not a general conception, but one based on an instance t* of T, i.e. one instance of many. One has serious doubts about what such 'contact' could amount to and how something could be an instance of a type without having a specific identity. And we should note that this is not a simple disagreement about ontology but a suggestion that such pictures are seriously flawed.

But this is to wander slightly from our brief, which is to determine what Langacker has to say about reference here. To understand that we need recourse to an example, similar in kind to example (X) given above, that Langacker uses to introduce his views on the indefinite article in particular and specific and non-specific interpretations in general.

(Y) Ollie hopes to marry a blonde.

Langacker writes : "The specific feature of examples like (Y) is that the indefinite occurs in an opaque context."[14]

This in itself is not so revealing, but what is interesting for the current viewpoint is how Langacker subsequently categorizes such contexts.

"A context is opaque when the substitution of one expression by another expression of identical reference does not necessarily preserve truth value. For example, if the specific blonde in question happens to be the Princess of Eastern Herzegovina, the truth of (Y) does not entail that of *Ollie hopes to marry the Princess of Eastern Herzegovina* (e.g. he might not know that the blonde is a princess, and he hates princesses)."[15]

What attracts our attention here is not the, perhaps unsurprising, realization that such substitutions fail, but the suggestion that the substitution of 'the Princess of Herzegovina' for 'a blonde' in (Y) is the substitution of one expression by another of **identical reference.** (My emphasis)

In other words, according to Langacker the definite noun phrase, 'The Princess of Herzegovina' has an identical reference to the indefinite noun phrase 'a blonde'. This not only states that both these noun phrases refer, it says quite unequivocally that they refer to the same thing. Moreover, it is this that has made the substitutions possible.

This kind of reduction of 'definite' and 'indefinite' noun phrases to something with a similar function, that of referring, differing only in terms of degree of definiteness, is one that is pervasive throughout the literature, and it is precisely such a similarity of function that the present analysis wishes to deny. For, as we shall see, it is the failure to draw a distinction with regard to reference between these 2 types of noun phrase that is the chief cause of the lack of clarity in the current debate.

The main point to emerge from the current section, however, is that for Langacker indefinite expressions such as 'a blonde', 'a wrench' and, presumably, 'a car' etc, all refer.

---

[13] Langacker, R, W. 1991, 104.
[14] Langacker, R, W. 1991, 104.
[15] Langacker, R. W. 1991, 104. (Footnote)

4.
Lyons on indefinite noun phrases

In an earlier section we had a brief introduction to Lyons's treatment of the function of the definite article. In this section I would like to give an outline of some of the things that he says about the role of the so-called 'indefinite article', 'a'.

The temptation to assume that this, in combination with a noun, has a referential value similar in kind to that of simple definite noun phrase remains strong.

Lyons offers the following example.

(1) Mary's gone for a spin in *a car she just bought.*

He suggests that "the most natural interpretation is that only one car is involved, but the possibility is left open that Mary may have bought more than one car."[16] And while most of us might <u>assume</u> that Mary had only just bought one car, cars being expensive items, etc, it does not follow that such is the case. Mary may indeed have bought several cars.

This need not concern us unduly. What is interesting in the current context is how Lyons goes on to talk about this example. As to why in (1), 'a' rather than 'the' is used we are informed, "The *referent* is taken to be unfamiliar to the hearer because it has not been mentioned before."[17]

So for Lyons, one reason for using 'a' rather than 'the' in example (1) above has to do with 'familiarity with the referent'. The indefinite article, 'a', tells us that the referent is unfamiliar. Leaving aside questions about what familiarity would amount to in such cases the main point that emerges is that, in Lyons's view, the phrase *a car she bought* most certainly has a referential function and, indeed, refers to some particular car, albeit one that hasn't been mentioned before.

This point is borne out by other examples that Lyons offers. Consider if you will examples (2) and (3).

(2) Pass me a *hammer.*

(3) Janet ran well and won *a prize.*

Lyons tells us that these sentences imply that there is more than one hammer in the situation to choose from, and that Janet won one of a number of prizes.[18] And to be fair to Lyons there are clearly contexts where (2) and (3) could be used in exactly the sense that he envisages. The intriguing thing is that these remain, for him, clear cases where the indefinite phrases *a hammer* and *a prize*, actually refer to things external to the phrase but whose referent is not unique. The fact that situations could be generated in which (2) and (3) are used where only one hammer and one prize was available, and which might cause a problem for Lyons's account, need not hold us back too much. The essential thing to grasp, for current purposes, is that for Lyons simple indefinite noun phrases such as *a hammer* and *a prize* refer and moreover, in this aspect at least, are indistinguishable from simple definite noun phrases.

5.
Reconsidering the problem

At this point I would like to take a fresh look at some of the issues we have been concerned with. To do this I would first of all like to reconsider some of the remarks attributed to Lyons at the start of this paper. This involved asking what the difference was between expressions like *the car* and *a car*, etc. Lyons suggested that many traditional grammars would give answers like the following : *The* indicates that the speaker or writer is referring to a definite or particular car etc., not just any. Lyons,

---

[16] Lyons, C. L, 1999, 8.
[17] Lyons, C. L, 1999, 13.
[18] Lyons, C. L, 1999, 12.

as we saw, questioned this : "Apart from being rather vague, this answer is quite inaccurate. If I say *I bought a car this morning*, I am not referring to just any car ; the car I bought is a particular one, and is distinguished in my mind from all others. Yet *a car* is indefinite."

On the face of it, and given what we have seen since, it looks like Lyons is claiming that both *the car* and *a car* refer.

The question Lyons raises and the way in which he raises it are important for the present analysis because they illustrate quite clearly the type of misunderstanding that pervades explanations of the function of definite and indefinite noun phrases.

To bring these points out let's have a look at the two examples Lyons gives to illustrate his point.

(1) I bought *a car* this morning.

(2) I bought *the car* this morning.

Lyons tells us : "*The car* here is in some sense more "definite", "specific", "particular", "individualized" etc. than *a car*, but as noted above, *a car* certainly denotes a particular or specific car as far as the speaker is concerned."[19]

First, a word of caution ; the words *the car* and *a car* are equally specific. They are all perfectly good words with clear jobs to do as evidenced by the fact that (1) and (2) are both readily understandable sentences. The task that confronts us is to explain the difference between sentence (1) and sentence (2), since they seem to be doing quite different work.

It may seem natural to focus on the two noun phrases *the car* and *a car* as being the key to the issue here because these constitute the difference between the two sentences. But we must be very clear that here we are dealing with words, not with things in the world external to them, like cars and rabbits etc, and also we must understand the contribution of these noun phrases in the context of the clauses in which they are used.

We could, perhaps, begin by asking what set of circumstances might lead someone to assert (1) above. Clearly, on the morning in question a certain person engaged in a transaction which resulted in that person becoming the owner of a certain vehicle, one with a very clear identity, easily recognizable as the same again. Now, we must not confuse this fact with what is actually conveyed in sentence (1) when the purchaser chooses to employ it later that day. Sentence (1) as it stands is very specific ; it tells us that the speaker has bought something, namely a car, on the morning of the day on which the sentence was uttered. In other words what was purchased was a car, not a house, a book, a cup of tea or even a lottery ticket. It classifies the purchase in a very useful and informative way. This is what it specifically tells us, what it specifically introduces us to. Now, of course, a particular object has been purchased with a definite shape, color, look and all the rest of it, and that object may well be parked in a certain garage in a well known street not so very far away from where the utterance is made. But I, as listener, as hearer, need not know any of this. I have just been presented with sentence (1) and I understand it effortlessly. I have just been introduced to the fact that a purchase has been made and that it was the purchase of a car as opposed to a bowler hat, a copy of a newspaper or a packet of sandwiches. In other words, the words *a car* serve to <u>define</u> what was bought, and providing such definitions is, of necessity, a very specific thing to do.

In the absence of any evidence to the contrary — (e.g. I bought a car this morning but sold it again immediately.) — it can be inferred from sentence (1) that the speaker is currently in possession of a very specific object, namely a particular car. But this inference flows from the understanding of the whole **sentence** including the all important verb phrase 'bought'. It follows from sentence (1) that the speaker has a car, but we must be very clear that this flows from the overall meaning of (1) and not simply from the use of the words 'a car'.

So whether or not the speaker has a certain car *in his mind*, something Lyons seems to think is tremendously important when he utters (1), is actually irrelevant. While the speaker may well know which car was actually purchased in the present case, the listener most certainly need not. The lis-

[19] Lyons, C. L, 1999, 2.

tener / hearer can never have access to what is going on in another's mind but has to take that person on the basis of what is said. And we have seen quite clearly what sentence (1) says. The speaker has told us that he has made a purchase and has defined the nature of that purchase. The function of the phrase 'a car' has been to define.

Recognizing this, we are not apt to confuse the words 'a car' with reference to any particular physical manifestation of one. Reference can only be meaningfully attributed to terms whose chief function, or one of them at least, is to designate or pick out an item whose identity has already been, or is about to be, established. Defining something is a completely different but nonetheless important act.

That still leaves us with the information presented in sentence (1). Given that the speaker's ownership of a car has been introduced to the listener, and despite what may or may not be going on in the speaker's mind, the way is now open to begin to talk about that particular car directly, and to do that there are various means available.

One commonly accepted means would be by using a pronoun such as 'it', whose main function is to refer to an item already introduced into a discourse. On the basis of hearing (1), a listener or hearer might well construct questions of the following kind :

(c) What kind of car is *it*?

(d) How much did you pay for *it*?

(e) How many miles does *it* do to the gallon?

As well as using pronouns to talk about items introduced into a particular discourse, there are other terms that can be used to perform a similar function. Instead of (c), (d) and (e) we could just as easily use the following :

(f) Where is *the car* now?

(g) What color is *the car*?

(h) How much did you pay for *the car*?

At this stage, let's suppose, indeed, that as a result of hearing sentence (1) a listener / hearer asks the three questions (f), (g) and (h). Each of these questions uses the noun phrase *the car*. Let's further suppose that the speaker of (1) answers in the following way :

(f*) It's in my garage at home.

(g*) It's red.

(h*) $ 10, 000.

Suppose, also, that (f*), (g*) and (h*) express truths about the car the speaker in (1) bought.

For the questions (f), (g) and (h) to actually be taken as questions about the car the speaker in (1) bought, the expression *the car*, used in each one of them has to be intended, and indeed taken, as being about that very car. Similarly for the speaker to answer in the way he did in (f*), (g*) and (h*), the expression *the car* in (f), (g) and (h) has to be taken as referring to the car the speaker bought.

This suggests something very interesting about the noun phrase *the car* in particular and by extension about uses of *the* + *simple noun* more generally.

Expressions like *the car* :

(i) Can be used as referring expressions.

(ii) Need to be taken as referring to a particular item in a particular discourse.

(iii) Are not usually used for purposes of definition.

In so far as this even approximates to the truth, we can now look back at sentences (1) and (2), which Lyons presented to us, with more understanding.

(2) I bought *the car* this morning.

We now see this, perhaps, in quite a different light to (1). Standing alone, as it does, sentence (2), while being fine grammatically, is a little difficult to actually interpret. The expression *the car* presumably refers to some context specific car but on the strength of what we are told, we cannot say which car that is. We cannot take the expression *the car* as referring to some previously introduced

car because no such car has been introduced.
Extra information in the following form would have helped :

A : There's a new car in the drive. I wonder whose it is.

B : I bought *the car* this morning.

In this case the expression *the car* could have been <u>taken</u> quite successfully as referring to the new car introduced in the first sentence presented by speaker A. Left as it is however, derived of context, sentence (2) remains a rather isolated piece of information.

We are now in a somewhat better position to explain the puzzle that Lyons put to us. Expressions like *a car* and *the car* function in clauses with quite different roles. *The car*, for the most part, is used to refer, and the connecting link is made by the hearer / listener in <u>taking</u> the phrase unambiguously. Expressions like *a car* on the other hand do not have a referential function and are used largely to <u>define</u> something that is actually referred to using other linguistic expressions. And it is this point which discredits Langacker's notion that the use of the nominal alone in the second clause, (for example in (B) above), is enough to establish contact with the instance of 'car' established in the first clause. Leaving aside conceptual worries about 'instance' etc., this is wrong on two fronts. 1) The indefinite and definite nominals, as such, <u>cannot</u> be connected. 2) The listener is required to <u>take</u> the nominal in the second clause as referring to something introduced by the whole <u>sentence</u> of the preceding clause. The link needs to be <u>actively</u> made.

In so far as terms like 'definite' noun phrase and 'indefinite' noun phrase have been used technically to denote expressions like 'the car' and 'a car', respectively, a certain mode of classifying them has been usefully employed. However, in so far as using the terms 'definite' noun phrase and 'indefinite' noun phrase has led to the assumption that the one is more 'specific' than the other, then a serious disservice has been provided. Both expressions have very specific, even definite functions but as we have seen, while these functions are not opposites, they remain quite usefully and importantly, distinct.

6.
The notion of 'take it'

At this stage we need to look more carefully at the notion of <u>take it</u>, a notion that has been appealed to in the course of criticizing various attempted explanations of the function of phrases involving the definite and indefinite articles.

It should be recognized at once that this is a very simple notion and one, too, whose significance may not be initially accepted. But we shall argue that, not only is it a very important notion, which explains links between sentence parts and other sentence parts or more generally between different chunks of information, it also constitutes part of the foundation of what makes language possible.

Let's look at an earlier example.

(8) A rather tall man accompanied by a longhaired woman came into the room. **The woman** was carrying a large suitcase.

It's not clear from (8) whether a real situation is being described or whether it's a situation that may appear, for example, in a story or novel. For the present purposes this need not matter. Two people have been introduced into a context and a certain action they both performed — that of entering a room — has been brought to our attention. We are further informed that one of them was a man and the other was a woman. Accordingly, from this information expressed in the form of a sentence, we know that at least two people are present. The next sentence begins '*The woman*', and we naturally take it that this refers to the woman introduced in the previous sentence, there being no other possibilities for the reference of that term. But 'taking it' in this way on the part of the listener is no unimportant thing. It has required a little work making a connection which, it must be stressed, is only contingent. Indeed, it is the fact that the connection is contingent that ensures that work must

be done in order to make the connection.

That it is actually a contingent connection can be seen from example (9) which differs slightly but importantly from example (8).

(9) A rather tall man accompanied by a longhaired woman came into the room. **The woman** was carrying a large suitcase. They were immediately followed by a little girl accompanied by a woman in her thirties. **The woman** looked a little annoyed but the girl was a picture of happiness.

Whereas it might seem right to take the first use of *the woman* as referring to the longhaired woman, it by no means seems the correct thing to do with the second use of *the woman*, which might more meaningfully be taken as referring to the woman accompanying the little girl. There is nothing that permanently connects either use of *the woman* to either of these people. In a given context a particular use of an expression like *the woman* is simply taken by the reader, often in connection with some other information, as referring to a certain introduced individual.

Given the right context this simple noun phrase can be used to refer to anyone of the millions of individuals who can be classified under the indefinite description, 'a woman'.

That the connection is contingent and yet can nonetheless be used in this way says something very important about the function of general terms. Used together with the definite article, a general term like *woman* is restricted to denote an identifiable particular. And, more importantly, the particular item in question can vary according to context. This fact simply underlines the earlier point that on each occasion of use of definite article + general term the speaker and hearer / reader have work to do making the connection, taking the noun phrase unambiguously.

This applies equally well to other perhaps, seemingly, more concrete examples. Consider our earlier example :

[In a room with three doors, one of which is open.]

(3) Close **the door** please.

Here, the speaker and hearer and the door in question are indeed in close physical proximity. However, that is not the end of the matter. The hearer understands the words, sees three doors and also sees that one of them is open. As we noted earlier, only an open door can be closed, so on hearing the words, 'Close the door', the hearer not only has to understand them as an imperative — which he may or may not obey — he has to **take** the words **the door**, something presented as a sound in this case, as forming a unit which refers to the only open door.

This may seem quite easy **work**, hardly work at all some might say, but it is making connections of this kind that we are continually required to do as we endeavor to make sense of all that we read, hear or say. No two consecutive sentences or two consecutively uttered chunks of information of the kind we have been considering can be made sense of without this connection — making activity of the brain. The fact that it seems easy to us, the fact that we do it seemingly without thinking about it, does not deter from the sophistication of performing the action or from its necessity. Just employing a definite noun phrase can never be the end of the matter. Action, work is always required.

Noun phrases are not nailed to the things they refer to. The activity that we have called 'taking it' is an activity which forms the very basis of what makes human languages possible.

It should not be altogether surprising that the notion of 'take it' that we have expounded here actually features quite commonly in everyday language use, even if the significance of it has never really been noted. In one of our earlier quoted passages Lyons, himself, makes unobtrusive use of it. This occurred in example (7).

[Two academics]

A : How did the seminar go?

B : Fine. **The student** gave an excellent presentation, which generated a really good discussion, with all the other students contributing well.

Lyons, you will recall, informs us that "the nature of a seminar makes it clear that one student stood out as having a special task, and this individual will be taken[20] to be the referent of **the stu-**

dent."

So a particular individual, in the context cited, is <u>taken</u> as being the referent of the term **the student**. And it is precisely this <u>taking it</u> activity that is essential for making connections whenever a simple definite noun phrase or a simple referring expression is used.

This, as we have been arguing, moves us away from a passive notion of reference where we simply state that a certain term refers to a certain thing, to a much more active one where it is the responsibility of every speaker and hearer taking part in an exchange to make the connection between referential terms and the items they refer to.

The fact that the human mind is able to do this at great speed does not deter from the fact that we are incessantly involved in this practice of <u>taking</u> terms in order to make sense of, and tie together, the chunks of language that comprise our linguistic life.

Intimately bound up with the notion of taking definite noun phrases as referring to items introduced into a particular context is the other side of the equation where the speaker decides when the moment is right to move from the language of introduction to language involving referential terms. This typically takes place when we want to talk about or refer to an item just alluded to.

An example might make this clearer, and, once again, it will serve us well to look at an earlier example we considered from Lyons.

"If I say <u>I bought a car this morning</u>, I am not referring to just any car ; <u>the car I bought</u> is a particular one."[21]

Examining this short passage, we notice that something very interesting has happened. As we noted previously, the <u>sentence</u> 'I bought a car this morning', presents new information, informing as it does of the purchase by the speaker of a certain vehicle. The subsequent introduction of the definite noun phrase, 'the car I bought' brings us, as it were, to attention. This is a <u>new</u> construction <u>created</u> on the strength of the information already provided. The purpose of this noun phrase is not to introduce but to pick out something already introduced, namely, the car that we were introduced to in the earlier clause, 'I bought a car this morning'. The hearer / reader on understanding this noun phrase, on grasping its semantics, has to <u>take it</u> as referring to the car just introduced in order for the short passage to make sense.

So, in order to enable the connection to be made to the earlier introduced vehicle, the speaker <u>creates</u> a referring expression of an appropriate kind and when the hearer / reader, understands the phrase and <u>takes it</u> in the expected manner, the connection is complete.

In coming to understand all of this we become aware of the difference between the language of defining and introducing on the one hand and the language involving referential terms on the other. And we also see the inter-relation of the movement from the one to the other. The act of the speaker in selecting or creating the appropriate noun phrase, and the equally sophisticated act of <u>taking it</u> successfully on the part of the hearer / reader, together form the basis of one of languages most fundamental features, that of introducing items in to a discourse and subsequently going on to talk about them.

7.
Overview and Conclusion

What we learn from all this is that simple noun phrases like *the car* and *a car* function quite differently from one another in the clauses in which they appear. While the first may be said to have a referential function, the second assumes a different but equally important function, that of defining.

Lyons, as we have seen, considered views which suggested that <u>both</u> simple definite and indefinite noun phrases have a referential function. That view has been challenged, as too has the view

---

[20] The emphasis here is my own.
[21] Lyons, C. L, 1999, 2.

that theories based either on *identifiability* or *inclusiveness* are capable of explaining how it is that definite phrases achieve their referential function.

We also noted, in a consideration of Langacker's views on the function of nominals with the definite and indefinite articles, a similar tendency to accord a referential function to both definite and indefinite noun phrases and to accept substitutions of the one for the other. The same arguments directed against Lyons in this regard are equally damaging to the arguments put forward by Langacker. The further view put forward by Langacker that the use of the definite article together with the nominal it grounds is enough, by itself, to ensure a connection with the appropriate item has also been criticised in favour of the essentially active and necessary notion of *take it*.

It follows from most of what we have said that simple definite noun phrases, unlike simple indefinite noun phrases have a simple referential function. They are used to pick out a certain item. But to pick anything out at all they have to be <u>taken</u> by the listener who has to make the link to the thing in question, and this, as we have been insisting, involves work. Once we recognize this we are freed of the problems bedeviling the so-called identifiability and inclusiveness theories and we no longer have to choose between them. In <u>taking</u> noun phrases unambiguously the listener simply has to make a certain connection. This might involve identifying something concrete like a spanner or a wrench, it might involve making a link to some prospective bride at a wedding the listener did not attend, or to an anesthetist not present at the time of speaking. The whole totality of ways that things can be pinned down by can be included. There is no one particular method for isolating the item in question.

We are all continually consumed by the task of trying to make sense of the language that we hear. In order to do this, and in order to take noun phrases successfully, we may at times be required to bring to bear not only the information presented in a particular context but the whole of the knowledge, linguistic or otherwise at our disposal.

Bibliography

Donnellan, K. S. (1966) Reference and definite descriptions. *Philosophical Review* 75 : 281-304.

(1978) Speaker reference, descriptions, and anaphora. In *Syntax and semantics*, vol.9 : *Pragmatics*, ed. P. Cole, 47-68. New York : Academic Press.

Evans, G. (1980) Pronouns. *Linguistic Inquiry* 11 : 337-62.

Frege, G. Sense and reference. In *Translations from the philosophical writings of Gottlob Frege*, ed. Peter Geach & Max Black, Oxford : Blackwell, 1960.

Hawkins, J, A. (1978) *Definiteness and indefiniteness : a study in reference and grammaticality prediction*. London : Croom Helm.

Kripke, S. (1972) Naming and necessity. In *Semantics for natural languages*, ed. Donald Davidson and Gilbert Harman, 253-355 and 736-9. Dordrecht : Reidel.

Langacker, R, W. (1989) *Foundations of cognitive grammar. Volume I*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, California.

Langacker, R, W. (1991) *Foundations of cognitive grammar. Volume II*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, California.

Lyons, C. (1999) *Definiteness*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, U.K.

E-mail : sherriff@fukujo.ac.jp