THE PROPER APPROACH TO DEFINITE ARTICLES
University of Rochester, February 12, 2018

1. INTRODUCTION

Contrary to accepted wisdom, proper names can very well combine with definite articles:

(1) a. the Seine, the Erie, the Atlantic water bodies
    b. the Milky Way, the Broadway former definite descriptions
    c. the Kennedys, the Netherlands plurals
    d. the Bronx, the Ukraine idiosyncratic cases

Two sides to the puzzle:
- (morpho)syntactic: why do some but not all proper names have the definite article and how is this reflected in their syntax?
- semantic: what is the interpretation of the proprial article and how does it relate to the regular definite article?

Majority view, in both syntax and semantics: the proprial article is a semantic fluke

My proposal: the proprial article is structurally and semantically identical to the regular definite article, which is itself a marker of definiteness rather than its semantic source:
- the differences lie in the predicate
- & in the feature [proper] (independently motivated by dedicated proprial articles)

2. APPROACHES TO THE STRUCTURE AND COMPOSITION OF PROPER NAMES

Two types of approaches: simplex (simple meaning, simple structure) and complex

Syntactic and semantic complexity are not always taken to coincide

2.1. Semantics

Two views on the semantics of proper names:


(2) \([\text{the Alice}] = \exists x [x \text{IS CALLED } [\text{ælɪs}]]\)

I obviously subscribe to the latter view

Matushansky 2008: proper names can appear in the predicate position

Further cross-linguistic evidence from Arabic, German, Greek, Icelandic, Hungarian, Korean, Latin, Pima, etc.

(3) a. Renowned Victorian author Lewis Carroll was born [PRO Charles Lutwidge Dodgson].
    b. Her uncle's death had made [her Lady Anne] and [her father Lord Holbrook].
    c. In the end of the 20th century the city was renamed St. Petersburg.

Given the independent evidence for the existence of predicate proper names, it is reasonable to assume that their argument uses are derived by normal means

2.2. Syntax

Three approaches:

- WYSIWYG (no structure): proper names are Ds
  Obvious problem: proprial articles
- head-movement (Longobardi 1994, 1999, Borer 2005, etc.)
- null determiner (Sloat 1969, Ghomeshi and Massam 2009, Fara 2015, etc.) or, as an alternative (Matushansky 2008), m-merger, Local Dislocation, conflation, etc.

**General syntactic consensus: proper names are structurally DPs:**

\[ \begin{array}{lll}
\text{a.} & \text{DP} & \text{b.} & \text{DP} & \text{c.} & \text{DP} \\
\hat{D}^0 & \hat{N}^0 & \hat{D}^0 & \hat{N}^0 & \hat{D}^0 & \hat{N}^0 \\
 Arthur & \emptyset & Arthur & \emptyset & Arthur & \emptyset \\
\end{array} \]

First impression: syntax supports the predicativist view
But (some) syntacticians do not think so, hence the “expletive definite article”

2.3. Predicativist reconciliation

First stab: the structure in (4b) or (4c), with \( D^0 \) containing the iota operator
Complications:
- featural constraints on the realization of \( D^0 \)
- morphologically conditioned realization
- the syntax of non-restrictively modified proper names

Eventual proposal: **the proprial definite article is a definiteness marker**

3. PHI-FEATURES AND AN OVERT \( D^0 \)

Generalization: non-default phi-feature values trigger the realization of the definite article

**English:** syntactically plural proper names require an overt definite article (Athens is not plural in English):

\[ \begin{array}{lll}
\text{a.} & \text{the Campbells, the Yorks} & \text{familial or political clan} \\
\text{b.} & \text{the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Monty Pythons} & \text{band, company} \\
\text{c.} & \text{the Mets, the Mikes, the Tigers} & \text{baseball or football team, Army regiment} \\
\end{array} \]

\[ \begin{array}{lll}
\text{a.} & \text{the Alps, the Rockies} & \text{mountain chains} \\
\text{b.} & \text{the Hebrides, the Orkneys} & \text{archipelagoes} \\
\text{c.} & \text{the Netherlands} & \text{conglomerate countries} \\
\text{d.} & \text{the Pleiades, the Hyades} & \text{constellations} \\
\end{array} \]

This is true for all languages where I have looked

Moltmann 2013 distinguishes several categories for **proper names in German:**
- names of people: no overt article in standard German
- names of churches and palaces: no overt article
- most toponyms (cities, villages, countries, continents, churches, palaces): no overt article
- names of mountains, lakes, temples: obligatory definite article
Matushansky 2015a: German proper names are bare iff they are not specified for number or gender features

- names of people: (may) have no formal gender
- names of churches and palaces: neuter (default)
- most toponyms (cities, villages, countries, continents, churches, palaces): neuter
- names of mountains, lakes, temples: (the gender of the corresponding sortal)

All plural proper names have an overt definite article

Near-ideal double dissociation: all non-neuter toponyms require an overt definite article and there is no toponym without the definite article that is not neuter:

7) a. der Irak, der Jemen... masculine
   b. die Schweiz, die Türkei... feminine
   c. die USA, die Niederlande... plural

8) München, Berlin, Frankfurt am Main... no gender (neuter)

Now what about neuter toponyms with an obligatory definite article (names of sub-regions)?

9) a. das Saarland ’Saarland’, das Baskenland ’the Basque country’…
   b. Deutschland ‘Germany’, England

Proposal: [neuter] can be a feature (cf. Percus 2011)

In French, names of cities are bare, but names of countries are (mostly) overtly definite:

10) a. à Paris, à Nice, à Londres… (apparent exceptions: Le Caire, La Rochelle…)…
   b. la France, le Canada, l’Egypte… (exception: Israël)

Hasselrot 1943/1944, Edwardsson 1968, Lomholt 1983: complex gender agreement patterns, a high degree of speaker confusion and variation:

11) Fondée en 1869, Kemi est devenu un centre industriel important. Founded in 1869, Kemi became an important industrial center.

French city names do not have gender!

Romanian (Meyer-Lübke 1890, Hoffman 1989, Cojocaru 2003, Gönczöl-Davies 2008, etc.): overt article in some cases and for some genders

Nominative/accusative: only feminine proper names ending in -a- are marked for definiteness (seen on the final vowel):

12) a. Maria, Ilinca, etc.
   b. Ion, Vasile, Alexandru, Luca, Carmen, Mimi, Irinel, Alice, Milagros

Table 1: Romanian declension (simplified)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>indefinite M</th>
<th>definite M</th>
<th>indefinite F</th>
<th>definite F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NOM/ACC</td>
<td>un inginer</td>
<td>inginerul</td>
<td>o ingineră</td>
<td>inginera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GEN/DAT</td>
<td>unui inginer</td>
<td>inginerului</td>
<td>unei inginere</td>
<td>inginerei</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Definite article is overt and marked for case, number and gender; the noun declines as well

Feminine proper names ending in -a- decline as definites

In the syncretic genitive-dative case all proper names are marked for definiteness: feminine proper names ending in -a- have a synthetic form with a case-marked definite suffix, but masculine proper names and feminine proper names ending in a consonant, -i, -u, etc., have a periphrastic form with the definite article lui:
(13) a. Mariei, Ilincăi, etc.
   b. lui Ion, lui Vasile, lui Alexandru, lui Luca
   c. lui Carmen, lui Mimi, lui Irinel, lui Alice, lui Milagros, etc.

With place names the same lui appears after the name under the same conditions:
The postnominal position of the definite article is due to an independent factors: the definite article is always realized on the first constituent in the NP (Grosu 1988, Dimitrova-Vulchanova and Giusti 1998, Dobrovie-Sorin and Giurgea 2006, among others)

(14) a. România – României, Timișoara - Timișoarei
   b. Egipt – Egiptului, București - Bucureștiului

Empirical generalization: the proprial article is overt when there are (more) features on it

The features may vary from language to language
In English it is probably number and inanimacy (or number and count)

4. **The proprial article as the Elsewhere realization**

Generally asked question: what happens to D in anarthrous proper names?

Generally given answer: **it is a special case and goes unpronounced**:
   ➢ allomorphy: [definite] → Ø in the context of [proper]
   ➢ head-movement: D attracts N[proper]
   ➢ morpho-syntactic process: m-merge/conflate/collapse [D+N[proper]]

Question: what are the conditions on article omission then?
Answer: they are negative!

“Realize D as zero/attract N to D/m-merge N and D when D has no features except [proper]”

**No process can be triggered by an absence of features**
   ➢ a head-movement account is untenable (e.g., for Romanian, case is unvalued on both D and N, and these are the unmarked values of case)
   ➢ an m-merger account is untenable unless phi-specification can block it

Zero can only be an Elsewhere case of allomorphy

5. **For the formal encoding of the proper/common distinction**

Interim conclusion: the overtness of the proprial article has nothing to do with semantics

Reasonable proposal: the proprial article is special

Evidence for [proper]: dedicated proprial articles, e.g., in Catalan or Fijian (Alderete 1998):

(15) a. la Maria
    DEF Mary
    Catalan, Gili 1967:26 via Ghomeshi and Massam 2009
   b. l’ Enric
def Henry
   c. en Joan
    DEF John

However, even in Catalan there are anarthrous proper names:
The dedicated proprial article is generally [+human] (but see Pons-Moll and Torres-Tamarit 2016)
   ➢ city names: (*la/*na) Barcelona
   ➢ [-familiar]: see Wheeler, Yates and Dols 1999 for dialectal differences
   ➢ in vocatives (very common cross-linguistically)
   ➢ in the predicate position (very common cross-linguistically)
The picture is quite plausibly the same: **the proprial article is overt when there are (more) features on it**

So the feature [proper] is morpho-syntactically quite real, but cannot be used to treat the zero allomorph as a non-default case

6. **The semantics of the proprial definite article**

Standard wisdom: the definite article returns the unique entity corresponding to its restriction (definition from Heim and Kratzer 1998:75):

Variations: familiarity, GQ, etc.

(16) $[\text{the}] = \lambda f : f \in D_{(e, t)}$ and there is exactly one $x$ such that $f(x) = 1$. the unique $y$ such that $f(y) = 1$

Can this definition be used for the proprial definite article?

Clear evidence for treating proper names as definite descriptions comes from modification

Matushansky 2015b: restrictive modification is impossible if the restrictively modified proper name is treated as entity-denoting

(17) $\begin{array}{c}
\text{DP} \\
\text{the} \\
\text{the more famous Francis Bacon} \\
\text{the} \\
\text{more famous} \\
\lambda x . x \text{ IS CALLED FB}
\end{array}$

What about non-restrictive modification then?

(18) a. And who can resist **the adorable Jane and Michael Banks**?
    b. I came across this little clip of **the great Maria Callas** on youtube.

Two options:

- **incidental non-restriction** (set intersection equals one of the two sets)
- **structural distinction** (non-restrictive modifier is structurally distinct)

The former cannot be true:

- the DP **the famous Francis Bacon** is ambiguous, not vague
- non-restrictive modifiers are always higher than restrictive ones
- in Romance, genuinely non-restrictive APs are prenominal, restrictive APs must be post-nominal (same for proper names, see Noailly 1991)
- non-restrictive relative clauses have different syntax (but they attach to the DP)

Solution: the IDENT type-shift (Bach and Partee 1980, Partee and Bach 1984, Partee 1986) or the corresponding IDENT operator:

(19) $[\text{IDENT}] = \lambda x . \lambda y . x = y$

Treating IDENT as a syntactic node here is for expository purposes only:

(20) $\begin{array}{c}
\text{DP} \\
\text{the} \\
\text{the great Maria Callas} \\
\text{great} \\
\text{type (e, t), a predicate that can be intersected with (modified)} \\
\text{type e, a referential proper name} \\
\text{t} \\
\text{\lambda x . x \text{ IS CALLED MC}}
\end{array}$
Of course, if proper names are entity-denoting to begin with (cf. Longobardi 1994), it becomes easier, but what to do then with restrictive modification?

Now: the iota operator (the semantics in (16)) does not correspond to the overt the

Objection: because it is a proper name!

Counter-objection: let’s look at Catalan

\[(21) \begin{align*}
\text{a.} & \quad \text{en/*el} \quad \text{Noam Chomsky} \\
& \quad \text{DEF.PN.MSG/DEF.MSG Noam Chomsky} \\
& \quad \text{Noam Chomsky} \\
\text{b.} & \quad \text{el/*en} \quad \text{famós} \quad \text{Noam Chomsky} \quad \text{non-restrictive} \\
& \quad \text{DEF.MSG/DEF.PN.MSG famous.MSG} \quad \text{Noam Chomsky} \\
& \quad \text{the famous Noam Chomsky} \\
\text{c.} & \quad *\text{el} \quad \text{famós} \quad \text{en} \quad \text{Noam Chomsky} \\
& \quad \text{DEF.MSG famous.MSG DEF.PN.MSG} \quad \text{Noam Chomsky} \\
& \quad \text{the famous Noam Chomsky}
\end{align*}\]

Interim conclusion: the meaning in (16) can be present without there being a proprial the

There exist a number of morphological and syntactic derivations based on a referential proper name embedded in a larger NP structure (cf. Boër 1975, Gary-Prieur 1991, 1994, Kleiber 1991, Jonasson 1992, see also Jeshion 2014a, b):

\[(22) \begin{align*}
\text{a.} & \quad \text{My daughter is such a perfect little Ora.} \\
\text{b.} & \quad \text{Two Osama bin Ladens came to the Halloween party.} \\
\text{c.} & \quad \text{Trafalgar Square is decorated by an 18 foot Nelson.} \\
\text{d.} & \quad \text{Putin is a veritable Stalin.}
\end{align*}\]

It seems unquestionable that in all of these uses the reference of the proper name needs to be established

In none of these cases does Catalan introduce an NP-internal proprial article (Coromina i Pou 2001:143-146)

With proper names, existential uniqueness can be present without there being an overt definite article

The proper article itself is present only on the condition of existential uniqueness (see Matushansky 2008: predicate proper names are often bare)

7. THE SEMANTICS OF THE REGULAR DEFINITE ARTICLE

Non-restrictive modification is possible for common NPs as well:

\[(23) \begin{align*}
\text{a.} & \quad \text{The industrious Greeks built beautiful monuments.} \\
& \quad \text{Solt to appear} \\
\text{b.} & \quad \text{Her valuable books were destroyed in the fire.}
\end{align*}\]

And the semantics in (16) cannot explain what happens in the predicate position:

\[(24) \quad \text{Scott is not the only author of Waverley.} \quad \text{Coppock and Beaver 2012}\]

Stowell 1991: inherently singleton role predicates are bare:

\[(25) \quad \text{Jesse became President/head of the department.}\]

But what about all the others?

Coppock and Beaver 2012, 2015: the English definite article encodes only the uniqueness presupposition; existential force comes from elsewhere

Other languages do not use the definite article in the predicate position at all
7.1. Double definiteness

There are three polydefinite structures that I am aware of:


(26) *den hungirga mus.en DEF hungry mouse.DEF


(27) ha-baxura ha-intelligentit DEF-girl DEF-intelligent

the intelligent girl

Treating definiteness as a formal feature that can be uninterpretable makes it possible to have more than one DP-internal marker of this feature (like with gender or number)

7.2. Bare kind names

Known at least since Carlson 1977a, b: in Germanic, kind names are bare, unlike in Romance (see Zamparelli 2002 for an overview of the literature):

True for kinds that have the lattice structure (bare plurals and mass nouns), not under the taxonomic reading (the Indian elephant)

(28) *I/*Ø pitbull sono impopolari in Inghilterra. DEF.MPL pitbull are unpopular in England

Pitbulls are unpopular in England.


However, adjectival kind names are not bare in Germanic (cf. Glass 2014, McNally and de Swart 2015, de Swart, McNally and Richtarikova [to appear], etc.):

(29) a. The creative are more likely to be intrinsically (internally) motivated. Glass 2014

b. The familiar is something dangerously wonderful

Adjectival modification is known to induce the presence of the article in proper names, but not in English kind names, in general

7.3. Exotic cases

Treating the definite article as a marker makes it possible for it to appear also on pronouns (in Fijian (Dixon 1988, Alderete 1998), Maori (Bauer 2003:109), Niuean (Massam, Gorrie and Kellner 2006), etc.)

…and fits in with what happens with pronominal articles (Postal 1969):

(30) we linguists, you guys

…and accounts for why it appears in DPs whose definiteness is semantically determined (cf. Löbner 1985):

What I want here is a connection to semantic agreement, where the presence of agreement morphology triggers the suitable constraint on the denotation
The proper approach to definite articles, University of Rochester (February 12, 2018)

(31) the best answer, the only solution, the first proposal, the king


I always stay in the most expensive hotel.

b. Jeg tar alltid inn på det dyreste hotellet. I always stay in the most expensive hotel.

It is not impossible that in some language the definite article is the locus of the iota operator

But in more familiar languages we see a variation that argues against this view

8. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

If the definite article is only a marker of definiteness with no semantics, then a null proprial article has no interpretation on both interfaces

Does this mean that there is in fact no D there?

This question is also asked about languages that have no articles

Reasonable alternative: the definite article is only the locus of the uniqueness presupposition (Coppock and Beaver 2012, 2015)

But then why do you need it with singleton-denoting predicates, as in (31)?

9. APPENDIX: ALTERNATIVE DERIVATIONS FOR PREDICATIVE NON-RESTRICTIVELY MODIFIED PROPER NAMES

The Duke-of-York τ-IDENT sequence could be absent (this doesn’t preclude other syntactic differences)

Counter-objection: there is evidence for NP-internal entity-denotation in non-restrictively modified proper names:

(33) This boy was to become the intrepid Richard Coeur-de-Lion, who was rumored to not be afraid of anything.

Structure of the argument:

- the raising verb become takes a small clause as its complement, and therefore the modified proper name should be a predicate
- an appositive relative is only compatible with entity denotation (type e), therefore an e-type node must be present in the structure

(34) Objection: It is, of course, possible that the corresponds to the iota operator (the semantics in (16)), the appositive relative is attached at the DP-level and there is IDENT on top of it
Counter-objection: post-nominal appositive nominal modifiers (Jack the Ripper). If the has the semantics in (16), how does it compose with its sister?

Further counter-objection: IDENT doesn’t seem to be available in the predicate position (Fara 2001: #The love of my life is tall, handsome, and John)

10. REFERENCES


Rami, Dolf. 2014. The multiple uses of proper nouns. Erkenntnis 80, pp. 405-432.


