



## Book Review

**Laura Becker. 2021.** *Articles in the world's languages* (Linguistische Arbeiten 577). Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. xix + 441. ISBN: 9783110724424.

Reviewed by **Ekkehard König**, Englisch Seminar, FU Berlin and Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, Freiburg, Germany, E-mail: koenig@zedat.fu-berlin.de

<https://doi.org/10.1515/flin-2022-2039>

**Keywords:** article systems; definite articles; indefinite articles; typology

In the last 100 years or so, (definite and indefinite) articles have received a great deal of attention, in several fields of inquiry (philosophy of language, logics, various subfields of linguistics) and from several perspectives. From a linguistic perspective, articles have been characterized as creating referential expressions together with nouns (semantics), as structure builders indicating the beginning or end of a noun phrase (syntax), as results of grammatical change leading from demonstratives to definite articles and from the numeral ‘one’ to indefinite ones (historical linguistics), as an areal feature of Europe (areal linguistics) and as linguistic phenomenon manifesting great diversity across languages (typology). Based on a thorough and comprehensive evaluation of the relevant literature, the book under review aims to provide a “detailed and systemic overview of articles, [...] exploring the referential functions that are covered by articles in the world’s languages, the attested combinations of articles into article systems and [...] the cross-linguistic tendencies” in terms of frequency and distribution (p. 9).

This ambitious goal is pursued in 10 chapters of text, on the basis of a sample of 104 languages with 141 articles, ultimately categorized into 10 major article types and 22 article systems. The sample is a convenient one, but also reasonably representative, since it contains 10–20 languages in each of the six macro areas distinguished in major handbooks of typology (Haspelmath et al. 2005). The data are taken from major grammars and descriptions, but are in part also based on the author’s own elicitations. For reasons of space, I will not go through all the chapters in great detail, but reserve some space for more detailed discussion of two points that are likely to be of special interest.

The first chapter (‘Introduction’) summarizes previous work, presents a brief overview of the subsequent chapters and describes goals, data and methodology of the book. In Chapter 2 articles are defined as a cross-linguistic category with the help of three criteria: (i) articles are referential markers, (ii) they “have to occur together with lexical referential expressions” (p. 37), nouns in most cases, (iii) they occur systematically in the contexts matching their referential functions. The

wording for the second criterion seems somewhat unfortunate. Nouns by themselves are denotational rather than referential expressions and acquire the latter function as a result of combining with articles, as do expressions of other lexical classes in some languages (cf. Spanish *el rojo* ‘the red one’, *el de Juan* ‘the one of Juan/Juan’s; cf. Cabredo Hofherr 2005). The third criterion also excludes the use of definite article in combination with proper nouns, although this case is not mentioned by the author. Proper nouns are contexts which match the referential functions of definite articles, but are rarely and only sporadically found in those contexts. Even in Basque where all nominals in argument positions combine with the definite article, proper nouns are not a possible context. Similar observations can be made for Arabic, where definite articles are only found in the context of proper names if they are an inseparable part of a name (cf. Rijkhoff 2002: 185ff).

Chapter 3 is a core chapter of the book and defines the 10 article types identified across languages on the basis of their referential function. A more detailed summary and discussion of this important chapter will be given below. In Chapter 4 the author presents an additional, i.e. negative, characterization of articles, by excluding related markers (demonstratives, possessive markers, negative polarity items) from that category. Chapters 5 and 6 elaborate the theoretical discussion of Chapter 3 and deal with the traditional division of article types into definite and indefinite ones. This distinction receives a strikingly new explication on the basis of more fine-grained differentiations, clear definitions and extensive exemplification with data from a wide variety of languages. The remarkable occurrence of articles that cut across the definite and indefinite domains is the topic of Chapter 7. Again, we find rich exemplification for the two cases identified, the inclusive-specific article, which in some languages covers the functions of both definite and specific indefinite articles (*John is waiting for the train; John is waiting for a girl. Here she comes*), clearly distinguished in others, and the referential article, which indicates referentiality as such and thus can be found both in the definite and the indefinite domain. Articles of this type cover the whole spectrum of meanings distinguished in other languages and merely indicate that the expression in question refers to some ‘discourse’ referent, existing or non-existing in the real world.

Chapter 8 deals with the cross-linguistic distribution of articles, discussing the overall frequency of article types and their areal distribution in the six linguistic macro areas. The chapter confirms earlier views that definite articles are the most frequent type (33% of the sample), though not much more frequent than indefinite articles (28%) according to the sample. The three other topics of this chapter (absence of generic articles; the revised and refined referential scale) will be discussed in more detail below. Chapter 9 is dedicated to a discussion of the article systems found across languages. On the basis of her empirical work, the author

distinguishes between 22 different systems which can comprise only a single article, two articles or more than two. Postulating article systems with only one member does make sense, of course, if the presence of the article is in clear semantic opposition to its absence. The 22 articles are grouped by how they cover the different referential functions, into systems that (i) only have articles in the definite domain, i.e. the domain where a referent is marked as identifiable for all discourse participants, (ii) only in the indefinite domain, where referents are not identifiable but “intended to refer” (Heusinger 2011), (iii) in both domains, and (iv) in systems with functionally overlapping articles. Simple systems with only one article are shown to be more frequent cross-linguistically than more complex systems, thus subsuming the traditional view that systems with a definite and an indefinite article are a feature of ‘Standard Average European’ (cf. Haspelmath 2001). This chapter also discusses two cases of dependencies between articles within a system and a general preference for splitting the referential space into a definite and an indefinite domain.

The final chapter summarizes the main findings of the book, which include not only rich observations on diversity, but also seven universals, mainly formulated as general tendencies (implicational connections, preferences), but also as a restriction allowing no exceptions in one case. Let me just mention one universal at this point, since it is easy to exemplify:

Universal 6: *Non-specific articles depend on specific articles*. The following well-known minimal pair illustrates the two uses of indefinite articles. The universal asserts that the occurrence of the second use in a language depends on the occurrence of the first:

- (1) a. John wants to marry a Norwegian. She lives in Oslo.
- b. John wants to marry a Norwegian, but he cannot find one.

The preceding brief overview gives an impression of the topics discussed in the book, but some additional discussion is certainly required to inform the non-expert of the results and the insights the book affords into the forms, functions and systems attested across languages.

## Mapping the article types onto referential functions

The fundamental problems of a typological study of articles include the following: to define the concept of article as a comparative concept, i.e. in a way that is applicable across languages, to identify the attested forms in the relevant sample, to analyze the possible meanings of these forms (their referential space), and to map the article types onto their referential functions, i.e. the contexts in which they can be used for the identification of discourse referents. The author solves these problems in a very

convincing way, as already pointed out for the definition of articles: articles combine with nouns in a systematic way to encode reference to discourse referents. Whether these forms precede or follow a noun and whether they co-occur with demonstratives or with another article is of no relevance. As already mentioned, this definition excludes constructions of articles with members of other lexical categories, but this is a problem we cannot expect to be addressed or solved by a cross-linguistic study.

The explication of the meaning and use of articles is based on the notion of identifiability, rather than competing notions, such as uniqueness, familiarity, functionality or salience also discussed in the literature (cf. Heusinger 2002). Identifiability, in turn, is explicated in terms of Fauconnier's concept of mental spaces (Fauconnier 1994). In both cases we may ask whether the explanans, i.e. the concepts 'identifiability' and 'mental space', provide an adequate explanation. In the theoretical literature neither of these concepts is generally accepted as explanans and many examples are given to point out difficulties. The criterion of identifiability is particularly difficult to apply to examples with quantificational, modal and predicative contexts like the following:

- (2) a. *Every man respects the woman he marries.* (Gisborne 2012: 625)
- b. *And I know that he [the Evil One] can impel his victims to do evil in such a way that the blame falls on **a righteous man**, and the Evil One rejoices then as **the righteous man** is burned in the place of his succubus.* (Umberto Eco, *The name of the rose*, p. 29, quoted in Heusinger 2002)
- c. *Mary is charming, intelligent and the love of my life.*

The use of the definite article in combination with the noun in (2a) is characterized as a bound variable by Gisborne and the second is described as not being analyzable in terms of 'identifiability' by Heusinger. If we go through the list of Becker's referential functions, however, even such examples can be accommodated. In the first case the definite NP is certainly a variable bound by the universal quantifier, but for each of the possible instantiations of the variable *man* and of the variable *the woman* the interlocutor can assign a referent on the basis of the open proposition ( $x$  marries  $y$ ), which makes the referent a cataphoric or establishing one. Similar considerations apply to (2b), an anaphoric use, where the antecedent of the anaphor includes part of the preceding sentence ('a righteous man blamed for evil deeds done by others'). Such analyses may not be suitable as basis for compositional semantics, but the referential functions distinguished and defined by the author provide an adequate basis for even including complicated data into a typological study. The only definition one might consider somewhat awkward is the one given for anaphoric referents ("a referent identifiable based on its shared identity with a previously mentioned referent"; p. 98). A definition in terms of co-reference ('a referent identified by the antecedent of the definite NP in the preceding discourse') would seem more to the point.

Building on earlier language-specific and comparative work by Hawkins (1978), Himmelmann (1996), Löbner (1985, 2011) and Schwartz (2013), the author elaborates a refined cross-linguistic grid of nine referential functions which includes, in addition to the usual distinctions (anaphoric, situationally unique, contextually unique, specific indefinite, unspecific indefinite), also a recognitional, an establishing and two types of bridging uses of articles in the definite domain. The article types attested in languages are mapped onto these referential functions, such that each type is related to that subset of functions it may be used to encode. Thus, an anaphoric article type in the sense of this book is not only used for anaphoric referents, as is, for example, the case in complex determiners containing the definite article as a component: English *the aforementioned*, French *ledit, ladite*, German *derlei*, which are mainly used in legal texts and other formal registers, but for a subset of referential functions in the definite domain.

- (3) a. *Sie boten mir gebrauchte Kleidung an, aber ich mag derlei Sachen nicht.*  
 ‘They offered me second hand clothes, but I don’t like that kind of thing.’  
 b. *Il est allé voir une spécialiste; ladite spécialiste n’avait pas de réponse.*  
 ‘He went to see a specialist, but the aforementioned specialist did not have an answer.’

The different referential functions are ordered, analogously to a semantic map, on a scale such that different function expressible by one article type are adjacent. The resultant scale which provides insights into admissible and inadmissible combinations of meaning as well as into historical developments is a more fined-grained version of the one proposed by Dryer (2014).

## Absence of generic articles

One of the many important points made in the book concerns the use of articles in generic sentence (pp. 337ff). It is a well-known fact that even genealogically closely related languages use different devices to indicate the generic character of an NP (cf. Behrens 2005). English uses bare NPs in the plural, in French the definite article is obligatory and German allows both options:

- (4) a. *Falcons are birds of prey.*  
 b. *Les faucons sont des oiseaux de proie.*  
 c. *(Die) Falken sind Raubvögel.*

Moreover, even in languages which allow options in the singular or plural the choice of an article can be determined by the predicate:

- (5) a. *The/a tiger is a mammal. Tigers are mammals.*  
 b. *The/\*a saber tooth tiger is extinct.*

The author's Universal 1 ("There are no articles whose main referential function is the coding of generic referents", p. 341) is not only based on cross-linguistic observations, but also on plausible explanations concerning the incompatibility between generic interpretations and referential markers: (i) a generic interpretation is often signaled by the tense rather than by referential markers of a sentence, (ii) there are simply no suitable source elements from which a generic article could develop, and (iii) a wide variety of languages never use articles to encode generic interpretations. Another point worth mentioning is the following: the author defines articles syntactically as occurring in the nominal domain, combining with nouns in the vast majority of languages. As already pointed out above in connection with two Spanish examples, however, combinations of articles with lexical categories other than nouns, e.g. adjectives and verbs, can be found in many languages:

- (6) English *the blind, the poor, the merciful, the meek* (Adj.)  
 (7) German *das Arbeiten* 'working', *das Lesen* 'reading', *das Trauern* 'mourning' (V)

As is shown by these examples, however, such phrases typically have a generic interpretation, so that their exclusion is justified.

If my review has focused more on the theoretical foundations of the book than on its empirical and comparative results, this is simple due to the fact that the content and achievements in the second domain are so much more difficult to summarize, to evaluate and to communicate. To discuss and compare one or two examples of the typical use of articles in a variety of languages would be quite an achievement in itself. What we find in this book is much more remarkable and illuminating: a thorough analysis and comparison of article and article systems in a reasonably representative sample of languages on the basis of detailed descriptions, controversies and new observations.

In sum, this book will not only be a point of departure for future research, as is modestly claimed by the author, but also a source of fundamental insights, inspiration and a point of orientation for many years to come.

## References

- Behrens, Leila. 2005. Genericity from a cross-linguistic perspective. *Linguistics* 43. 275–344.  
 Cabredo Hofherr, Patricia. 2005. Les séquences déterminant défini+adjectif en français et en espagnol: Une comparaison. *Recherches Linguistiques de Vincennes* 34. 143–164.

- Dryer, Matthew. 2014. Competing methods for uncovering linguistic diversity: The case of definite and indefinite articles. *Language* 90(4). e232–e249.
- Fauconnier, Gilles. 1994. *Mental spaces*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gisborne, Nikolas. 2012. The semantics of definite expressions and the grammaticalization of the. *Studies in Language* 36(3). 603–644.
- Haspelmath, Martin. 2001. The European linguistic area: Standard Average European. In Martin Haspelmath, Ekkehard König, Wulf Oesterreicher & Wolfgang Raible (eds.), *Language typology and language universals*, vol. 2, 1492–1509. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Haspelmath, Martin, Matthew Dryer, David Gil & Bernard Comrie (eds.). 2005. *The World Atlas of Language Structures (WALS)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hawkins, John A. 1978. *Definiteness and indefiniteness: A study in reference and grammaticality prediction*. London: Croom Helm.
- Heusinger, Klaus von. 2002. Specificity and definiteness in sentence and discourse structure. *Journal of Semantics* 19. 245–274.
- Heusinger, Klaus von. 2011. Specificity, referentiality and discourse prominence: German indefinite demonstratives. In Ingo Reich, Eva Horch & Dennis Pauly (eds.), *Sinn und Bedeutung 15. Proceedings of the 2010 Annual Conference of the Gesellschaft für Semantik*, 9–30. Saarbrücken: Saarland University Press.
- Himmelman, Nikolaus. 1996. Demonstratives in narrative discourse: A taxonomy of universal uses. In Barbara A. Fox (ed.), *Studies in anaphora*, 205–254. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Löbner, Sebastian. 1985. Definites. *Journal of Semantics* 4. 279–326.
- Löbner, Sebastian. 2011. Concept types and determination. *Journal of Semantics* 28. 279–333.
- Rijkhoff, Jan. 2002. *The noun phrase*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schwarz, Florian. 2013. Different types of definites cross-linguistically. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 7(10). 534–559.