

Determiners, determinatives and possessors: a typological and formal perspective

The initial goal of this paper is to establish the universal validity of the notion “determiner” as a grammatical function, rather than as a structural position or word-class. The view of determiners defended here extends the analysis of English noun phrases in Payne & Huddleston (2002), and can be neatly formalised in a theory such as Lexical-Functional Grammar (Bresnan 2001) which distinguishes between structural and functional levels of representation. It contrasts with proposals which, based on the structuralist tradition, treat “determiner” as a positional slot (e.g. Bloomfield 1933), or as a word-class (e.g. Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik 1972). It can also be contrasted with generative views such as that of Lyons (1999), who distinguishes between word-class (“determiner”) and the expression of definiteness, but associates the latter with a position in the structural notion DP.

We argue that, in any noun phrase, the function of a determiner is to add a specification of definiteness or quantitative indefiniteness to any noun (or combination of noun and dependent) which inherently lacks that specification. It follows then that there can only be one determiner per noun phrase. Various syntactic categories can function as determiner, the most prototypical being determinative, a word-class that includes articles, demonstratives, universal and existential quantifiers, cardinal numerals, and negative quantifiers such as English *no*.

The restriction that there can only be one determiner per noun phrase does not necessarily extend to determinatives. For example, in a Hungarian noun phrase such as *ez a lány* (this ART.DEF girl.NOM) ‘this girl’, one determinative, the definite article *a*, acts as determiner, and a second, the demonstrative *ez*, merely has a modifier function. By contrast, in English *this girl* the demonstrative is the determiner. This framework allows a statement of basic co-occurrence restrictions between determinatives in terms of the functions they fulfil. For example, definite and indefinite articles always function as determiners, and are therefore universally incompatible regardless of whether they occupy the same positional slot. In English, the demonstrative too is almost invariably a determiner, and hence incompatible with the definite article. This contrasts with Hungarian, where the demonstrative is definite but is not permitted as determiner.

Depending on the language, possessor noun phrases can also be determiners rather than just modifiers. If they are definite determiners, as with Saxon genitive noun phrases in English, then the mutual exclusiveness between genitive possessors and all other determiners immediately follows (but co-occurrence with determinatives which do not function as determiners is permitted). The functional notion of determiner given here does not fall foul of the objections raised by Haspelmath (1999) to an account of mutual exclusiveness based on a positional slot notion of determiner: the positional slot notion for example cannot account for cases in which definite article and possessor are mutually exclusive but fall on opposite sides of the head, as in Welsh (*y) *car y meddy* (ART.DEF car ART.DEF doctor) ‘the doctor’s car’. The functional view also permits a natural treatment of possessors which redundantly trigger definiteness marking in the accompanying noun, as for example in northern Swedish dialects: the possessor functions as the sole determiner, and the noun marking must be treated as agreement.

This functional view of determiners can be neatly formalised in Lexical-Functional Grammar by allowing the exponent of (in)definiteness, wherever it is positioned, to map the appropriate value of a definiteness feature to functional structure. This in its turn has consequences for the representation of syntactic structure: it is no longer necessary to assume that determiners are universally associated with a single structural position, and in particular, that possessor determiners are associated with a structural position such as specifier of DP or NP.

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