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Definiteness

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Introduction.....	2
Foundational works and comprehensive overviews.....	2
Handbook articles	3
Classical papers for theories of definiteness	4
Definiteness and morphological marking	5
Typology of article systems	6
Definiteness in particular languages.....	7
Grammaticalization of the definite article.....	8
Semantic theories of definiteness	9
Uses of the definite article	10
Uniqueness theories	12
Familiarity	13
Salience	14
Definiteness and reference	15
Definite descriptions and analytic philosophy.....	15
Definiteness and indefiniteness	16
Definiteness and referentiality, and the referential vs. attributive contrast.....	17
Definiteness and the specific vs. non-specific contrast	18
Definiteness and discourse	19
Definiteness, anaphoricity and E-type pronouns	20
Definiteness hierarchies	20
Definiteness and language acquisition.....	21

Introduction

Definiteness is a semantic-pragmatic notion that is closely associated with the use of the definite article (or determiner) in languages like English, Hungarian, Hebrew or Lakhota. The definite article can be used in different conditions: deictic, anaphoric, unique and certain indirect uses, often also called “bridging uses”. Accordingly, there are different semantic theories of definiteness such as the salience theory, the familiarity or identifiability theory and the uniqueness or inclusiveness theory. Noun phrases with the definite article, also known as “definite descriptions” are a key issue in semantics and analytic philosophy as they are a key issue in semantics and analytic philosophy with respect to the interaction of reference and description in identifying an object. The research and analysis of definiteness is not only of great importance for the linguistic structure of languages, but also for our understanding of reference and referring in philosophy, cognitive science, computational linguistics and communication science.

Foundational works and comprehensive overviews

Definiteness is the central referential property of nominal expressions, in linguistics, most often related to the use of the definite article in languages that have definite articles. There are many monographs on definiteness in particular languages (**Definiteness in particular languages**). More general approaches are represented by Christophersen 1939 on the use and diachronic development of the English articles, and by Kramsky 1972 on the history of research and an overview of article systems in various languages. Hawkins 1972 provides the most influential and comprehensive study of definiteness and its grammatical contrast, while Lyons 1999 embeds the discussion into an updated view broad descriptive material. Neale 1990 is an excellent monograph spelling out the conception of definiteness in analytic philosophy (**Definite descriptions and analytic philosophy**).

Christophersen, Paul. 1939. *The Articles. A Study of Their Theory and Use in English*. Copenhagen: Munksgaard.

[The seminal work on the different uses and the diachronic development of the definite article in English, which also laid the theoretical foundation for the discussion in the 20th century within the “familiarity” theory of definiteness.](#)

Hawkins, John. 1978. *Definiteness and Indefiniteness: A Study in Reference and Grammaticality Prediction*. London: Croom Helm.

[Splendid overview of the grammatical effects of definiteness. Establishes the “inclusiveness” theory of definiteness as a development of the uniqueness theory.](#)

Krámský, Jiri. 1972. *The Article and the Concept of Definiteness in Language*. The Hague: Mouton.

This monograph provides an excellent introduction into the history of the research as well as a broad overview of article system in various languages.

Lyons, Christopher. 1999. *Definiteness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Recent and most comprehensive work on the uses of definite articles, the semantics of definiteness and its diachronic dimension under a functional and typological approach.

Neale, Stephen. 1990. *Descriptions*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Best and very accessible presentation and defense of the Russellian view on definite description and its contemporary discussion in analytic philosophy.

Handbook articles

Definiteness is the most researched semantic-pragmatic category of nouns, represented in most handbooks and linguistic dictionaries by articles of different sizes, coverages and perspectives. Abbott 2004 is an excellent, comprehensive and accessible first choice for an informed overview. Lyons 1991 is a shorter and more descriptively oriented summary. Zwarts 1994 discusses the semantics of definite expressions in general, and Heim 1991 is the most excellent research article of different semantic conceptions of definite noun phrases: the Fregean account (definite descriptions as referential terms) vs. the Russellian account (definite descriptions as denotational terms or quantifier expressions). Heim 2011 is an updated and shortened overview with some bias towards a Russellian account.

Abbott, Barbara. 2004. Definiteness and Indefiniteness. In L. R. Horn and G. Ward (eds.). *The Handbook of Pragmatics*. Oxford: Blackwell. 122-149.

Very comprehensive, clear and accessible overview of DP-types, the semantics of definiteness and the relation to other semantic-pragmatic categories, such as specificity.

Lyons, Christopher. 1999. Definiteness. In K. Brown and J. Miller (eds.). *Concise Encyclopedia of Grammatical Categories*. Amsterdam: Elsevier. 125-131.

Short and informative survey with focus on descriptive issues.

Heim, Irene 1991. Artikel und Definitheit. In A. von Stechow and D. Wunderlich (eds.). *Semantik. Ein internationales Handbuch der zeitgenössischen Forschung*. Berlin: de Gruyter. 487-535.

Probably the best article ever written on definiteness. Clearly structured with very balanced arguments for Fregean vs. Russellian accounts.

Heim, Irene 2011. Definiteness. In C. Maienborn, K. von Heusinger and P. Portner (eds.). *Semantics: An International Handbook of Natural Language Meaning*. Vol. I. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Clear discussion of the different aspects of definite noun phrases. It is quite different from the 1999 article, and argues for a Russellian account.

Zwarts, Franz. 1994. Definite Expressions. In R. E. Asher (ed.). *The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*. Oxford: Pergamon.

Comprehensive overview of the properties of definite expression like proper names, demonstratives, definite noun phrases and certain quantifiers.

Classical papers for theories of definiteness

The concept of “definiteness” was explicitly introduced in de la Grasserie 1896, who associates it with different uses of the definite article. He assumes an “identifying” function of the definite article as the base for the concept of definiteness. Russell 1905 argues on the basis of valid and invalid inferences from the famous sentence “The King of France is bald” that the definite article expresses semantic uniqueness of the concept involved (“the F”: the unique F). Strawson 1950 contends that uniqueness is not part of semantics, but of pragmatics, what he later calls “presupposition”, the concept that was already described by Frege 1892. Christopherson 1939 claims that the concept of definiteness is based on familiarity or givenness, spelt out by Heim 1983 in a dynamic semantics framework (“the F”: the given / familiar F). Lewis 1979 criticizes Russell’s uniqueness condition and argues for salience as the underlying principle for definiteness (“the F”: the most salient F). Hawkins 1978 formulates an extension of the uniqueness condition of Russell for plural and mass terms, which he terms “inclusiveness”. Löbner provides arguments for a relational or functional analysis of definiteness accounting for problematic cases in other theories.

Frege, Gottlob. 1892/1980. Über Sinn und Bedeutung. *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik* 100. 25–50. English translation in: P. Geach and M. Black (eds.). *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*. Oxford: Blackwell. 56-78.

Seminal paper on the distinction between reference and sense. Frege also discusses for the first time the notion of “background information” of definite noun phrases, which Strawson later called presupposition.

de la Grasserie, Raoul. 1896. De l'article. *Mémoires de la Société Linguistique de Paris* 9,4. 285-322, 381-394.

This article introduces the concept “definiteness” for the first time and formulates different conditions on the uses of the definite article.

Christophersen, Paul. 1939. *The Articles. A Study of Their Theory and Use in English*. Copenhagen: Munksgaard.

Argues against a uniqueness theory of definiteness and formulates the familiarity theory.

Hawkins, John. 1978. *Definiteness and Indefiniteness: A Study in Reference and Grammaticality Prediction*. London: Croom Helm.

Establishes the “inclusiveness” theory of definiteness as a combination of uniqueness and familiarity theory.

Heim, Irene. 1983. File Change Semantics and the Familiarity Theory of Definiteness. In R. Bäuerle, C. Schwarze and A. von Stechow (eds.). *Meaning, Use and the Interpretation of Language*. Berlin: de Gruyter. 164-189.

Provides a comprehensive and lucid argument in defense of the familiarity theory for definiteness and anaphora.

Lewis, David. 1979. Scorekeeping in a Language Game. In R. Bäuerle, U. Egli and A. von Stechow (eds.). *Semantics from Different Points of View*. Berlin: Springer. 172-187.

Criticizes Russell's uniqueness condition and replaces it by a principle of salience. A definite noun phrase refers to the most salient or prominent object of the kind described by the descriptive content.

Löbner, Sebastian. 1985. Definites. *Journal of Semantics* 4. 279-326.

A distinction is made between semantic and pragmatic definite noun phrases, based on lexical information and pragmatic enrichment.

Russell, Bertrand. 1905. On Denoting. *Mind* 14. 479-493.

Formulates the uniqueness condition for definite noun phrases (or definite descriptions, as they are known in analytic philosophy). Until now the main semantic analysis for definiteness.

Strawson, Peter. 1950. On Referring. *Mind* 59. 320-344.

Criticizes Russell's assumption that uniqueness is part of semantics. Rather assumes that it is part of pragmatics, more precisely it is a presupposition.

Definiteness and morphological marking

The semantic-pragmatic category "definiteness" is closely related to the definite article in languages with article systems. Languages differ with respect of their article system and the range of function a particular article covers. This diversity in functions can be explained by the observation that definite articles develop from other linguistic items, very often from demonstratives, and only incrementally acquire different functions. Languages do have other means to express definiteness, from word order and information structure to interaction with other nominal and verbal categories, including aspect. However, it is much more difficult to assign clear cut functions to such means as they often express definiteness only in certain contexts or in absence of other stronger preferences. De Hoop 1992 and van der Does & de Hoop 1998 show the interaction of word order and definiteness, while Büring focuses on the contrast between definites and indefinites with respect to word order. Chafe 1976 provides evidence that "definite" is not the same as "given". The interaction between aspect and definiteness is discussed in Leiss 2000, and Baker & Travis 1997 give an example from Mohawk, where a mood marker can be best analysed as definite.

Baker, Mark & Travis, Lisa 1997. Mood as verbal definiteness in a "tenseless" language. *Natural Language Semantics* 5. 213-269.

This article argues that the mood morphemes found on punctual verbs in Mohawk are to be analyzed semantically as markers of verbal definiteness/specificity.

Büring, Daniel. 2000. What Do Definites Do That Indefinites Don't? In C. Féry and W. Sternefeld (eds.). *Audiatur vox sapientiae. A Festschrift for Arnim von Stechow*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.

70-100.

This contribution shows the interplay of definiteness and word order in German, more specifically, how definiteness influences the ordering of objects in the Mittelfeld of German double-object constructions.

Chafe, Wallace. 1976. Givenness, Contrastiveness, Definiteness, Subjects, Topics, and Point of View. In C. Li (ed.). *Subject and Topic*. New York: Academic Press.

The article discusses the difference between definiteness and givenness, providing evidence that both notions are independent and cross-categorize.

van der Does, Jaap and Helen de Hoop. 1998. Type-shifting and Scrambled Definites. *Journal of Semantics* 15. 393-416.

Short version of the monograph by de Hoop 1992, but with additional semantic analysis in terms of type-shifting

de Hoop, Helen. 1992. *Case Configuration and Noun Phrase Interpretation*. Doctoral dissertation, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen.

Broad and very carefully argued monograph on the interaction of word order and semantic-pragmatic categories, such as definiteness.

Leiss, Elisabeth. 2000. *Artikel und Aspekt. Die grammatischen Muster von Definitheit*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Comprehensive and very informed study of the development of the articles in Germanic languages. Leiss argues that one of the driving forces is the loss of aspectual information in the verbal domain.

Typology of article systems

The main means to express (or more correctly: to detect) definiteness is the use of articles. Probably less than half of the world's languages do have definite articles, and in those languages the article systems show a broad variety from systems with only a definite article to systems with more than one definite and / or indefinite articles. Rich article systems may make finer distinction than just definite vs. indefinite, while systems without article have to employ other means for the different functions generally associated with the definite article (**Uses of the definite article**). Himmelmann 2001 provides a very informative survey on article systems and their functions. Kramsky 1972 discusses several different article systems in a variety of languages; On a sample of about 550 languages, Dryer 2005 shows the quantitative distribution of the different systems and forms. Schröder 2006 presents an in-depth-study on article systems in European languages. Plank 2003 is a study on constructions with more than one article.

Dryer, Matthews. 2005. Definite Articles. In M. Haspelmath, M. Dryer and D. Gil (eds.). *The world atlas of language structures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The article presents qualitative and quantitative results from a sample of about 550 languages.

Himmelmann, Nikolaus 2001. Articles. In: M. Haspelmath, E. König, W. Oesterreicher and W.

Raible (eds.). *Language Typology and Language Universals. An International Handbook* Vol.1. Berlin: de Gruyter. 831-841.

This article summarizes research results with respect to semantic, functional, syntactic, morphological and etymological parameters.

Krámský, Jiří. 1972. *The Article and the Concept of Definiteness in Language*. The Hague: Mouton.

Very informative contribution on article systems of various languages, on which it is often difficult to get more information.

Plank, Frans. 2003. Double Articulation. In F. Plank (ed.). *Noun Phrase Structure in the Languages of Europe*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 337-395.

Very interesting study of the distribution of more than one definite or indefinite article within noun phrases.

Schroeder, Christoph. 2006. Articles and Article Systems in some Areas of Europe. In G. Bernini, and M. Schwartz (eds.) *Pragmatic Organization of discourse in the language of Europe*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 545-611.

Very carefully worked out overview of article systems in Northern, Southeast and Eastern Europe. Discusses different sources for the development of definite articles.

Definiteness in particular languages

Definiteness is a central semantic-pragmatic category and is therefore treated in nearly every descriptive grammar, even if the language does not display definite articles. In other words we will find basic information about definiteness and the definite article in most languages for which we have appropriate grammars. The following studies, however, focus on definiteness or on the definite article in particular languages and analyse their different uses according to a theoretical framework. Christophersen 1939 explains the use of the definite article by his familiarity theory, Chesterman 1991 compares the use of articles in English and Finnish and develops a five-category system for English. Leonetti 1999 is an excellent study that combines detailed empirical observation with most recent theoretical frameworks. Ebert 1971 is a comprehensive analysis of a language with two definite articles and it provides a theoretical account for their distribution. Chen 2004 argues for a theory of identifiability accounting for the data in Chinese, and Danon 2001 embeds definiteness in the syntactic structure of Hebrew. Birkenmaier 1979 is an outstanding analysis of nominal determination without articles in Russian.

Birkenmaier, Willy. 1979. *Artikelfunktionen in einer artikellosen Sprache. Studien zur nominalen Determination im Russischen*. München: Fink.

Classical work on an articleless language and on the strategies to express definiteness by other means.

Christophersen, Paul. 1939. *The Articles. A Study of Their Theory and Use in English*. Copenhagen: Munksgaard.

This monograph is still the best study on the distribution and the diachronic development of the articles in English.

Chen, Ping. 2004. Identifiability and Definiteness in Chinese. *Linguistics* 42 (6). 1129-1184.

Very clever article that shows that definiteness in Chinese is best accounted for by an identifiability theory.

Chesterman, Andrew. 1991. *On Definiteness. A Study with Special Reference to English and Finnish*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

A comprehensive analysis of the English and Finnish article system, which shows that a close comparison of two systems yields new and unexpected insights.

Danon, Gabi. 2001. Syntactic Definiteness in the Grammar of Modern Hebrew. *Linguistics* 39 (6). 1071-1116.

Excellent contribution to the relation between the semantic-pragmatic notion of definiteness and its syntactic encoding in Hebrew.

Ebert, Karen. 1971. *Referenz, Sprechsituation und die bestimmten Artikel in einem nordfriesischen Dialekt*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kiel.

In-depth investigation on the Low-German dialect Föring with two definite articles. It discusses interesting theoretical implications.

Leonetti, Manuel. 1999. El Artículo. In I. Bosque and V. Demonte (eds.). *Gramática Descriptiva de la Lengua Española*. Madrid: Espasa Calpe, Colección Nebrija y Bello, 787-890.

Excellent study that contains a detailed analysis of the use of the definite article in Spanish.

Grammaticalization of the definite article

Definite articles often grammaticalize from demonstratives or possessive markers. Thus the range of functions of the definite article in one particular language also depends on its stage on a grammaticalization path. Greenberg 1978 has formulated the famous article cycle as consisting of three stages: marking (i) definite nouns, (ii) generic nouns, and (iii) being a general noun marker, which allows starting the cycle with a new lexical item again. Himmelmann 1996 investigates the grammaticalization from demonstratives to definite articles according to descriptive data and various functions. Lyons 1999 goes even a step further assuming that the (often diverse) semantics of the definite article can only be understood as an instance of diachronic change. Harris 1980 provides a more general picture on the diachronic development, Selig 1992 gives a comprehensive overview of the forming of article systems in Romance languages, Wespel 2008 analyses the use of articles in French-based Creoles, and Laury presents a focused study of the use of a neutral demonstrative as definite article in Finnish.

Greenberg, Joseph. 1978. How does a language acquire gender markers? In J.H. Greenberg, C.A. Ferguson and E.A. Moravcsik (eds.). *Universals of Human Language Vol. 3: Word Structure*. Stanford: Stanford UP. 47-82.

Greenberg formulates the article cycle (from marking definite reference to generic reference and then to indicating the categorical status of a noun), which is illustrated with data primarily from African languages.

Harris, Martin B. 1980. The marking of definiteness: a diachronic perspective. In E.C. Traugott. (ed.) *Papers from the 4th international conference on historical Linguistics*. Amsterdam: Benjamins. 75-86.

Very clear and informed overview on the diachronic development of the definite article.

Himmelmann, Nikolaus. 1996. *Deiktikon, Artikel, Nominalphrase: Zur Emergenz syntaktischer Struktur*. Tübingen: Niemeyer. 322-340.

Provides a very accessible theoretically informed survey on different functions of deictic elements and definite articles and their grammaticalization paths.

Laury, Ritva 1997. *Demonstratives in Interaction. The emergence of a definite article in Finnish*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

This book concerns one of the paradigm examples of grammaticalization, the development of a definite article from a demonstrative determiner.

Lyons, Christopher. 1999. *Definiteness*. Chapt. 9: Diachronic aspects. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Defends the view that the function of definite articles can only be understood as the result of complex grammaticalization processes.

Selig, M. 1992. *Die Entwicklung der Nominaldeterminanten im Spätlatein. Romanischer Sprachwandel und lateinische Schriftlichkeit*. Tübingen: Narr.

The foundational work on the development of article systems in Romance languages from Latin.

Wespe, Johannes. 2008. Descriptions and their domains. The patterns of definiteness marking in French-related creole. *SinSpec 2. Working Papers of the SFB 732*. Stuttgart: Universität Stuttgart.

An exemplarily detailed discussion of the grammaticalization and different functions of articles in French-based creoles.

Semantic theories of definiteness

In a pretheoretical definition, an expression is definite if it unambiguously denotes or refers to one object, i.e. if the object can be identified as the only one that is denoted by the expression. The fixed reference of a definite expression depends on different grounds: it can be determined by lexical material, by semantic rules or by pragmatic strategies. Traditionally, proper names, definite NPs, demonstratives, personal pronouns and possessive constructions are regarded as definite. Barwise & Cooper 1981 provide a definition in terms of semantic properties of quantifier phrases. Zwarts 1994 summarizes the discussion about the adequacy of such definitions. Partee 1986 argues that definite noun phrases can shift between different semantic types. Birner & Ward 1995 and Abbott 2010 (chap. 9) provide a list of different semantic tests for definiteness. The constraint that a definite expression cannot be inserted in existential contexts (*There*

is...) is known as “definiteness effect” since Safir 1982 and it is since then subject of extensive controversy as documented in various contributions in Reuland & ter Meulen 1987. More detailed semantic theories of definiteness generally focus on definite noun phrases (or definite description) (**Uniqueness theories** **Familiarity theories** **Salience theories**)

Abbott, Barbara. 2010. *Reference*. Chapt. 9: Definiteness, strength, partitives and referentiality. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[The most recent comprehensive textbook on reference, with particular focus on definite noun phrases.](#)

Barwise, Jon and Robin Cooper. 1981. Generalized Quantifiers and Natural Language. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 4. 159-219.

[Describes the semantic properties of definite expression in the framework of Generalized Quantifier Theory.](#)

Partee, Barbara. 1986. Noun Phrase Interpretation and Type-Shifting Principles. In J. Groenendijk, D. de Jongh and M. Stokhof (eds.). *Studies in Discourse Representation Theory and the Theory of Generalized Quantifiers*. Dordrecht: Foris. 115–143.

[Foundational work on the possibility of shifting the semantic type of definite noun phrases.](#)

Reuland, Eric and Alice ter Meulen (eds.). 1987. *The Representation of (In)definites*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

[Thorough discussion on different semantic properties of definite and indefinite noun phrases with focus on existential contexts and definiteness effects.](#)

Zwarts, Franz. 1994. Definite Expressions. In R. E. Asher (ed.). *The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*. Oxford: Pergamon.

[Overview of the properties of definite expression like proper names, demonstratives, definite noun phrases and certain quantifiers.](#)

Birner, Betty and Gregory Ward. 1995. Definiteness and the English existential. *Language* 71. 722-742.

[Critique of a semantically oriented analysis of definiteness and definite effects.](#)

Safir, Kenneth. 1982. Syntactic chains and the definiteness effect. Ph.D. Dissertation. Cambridge: MIT. Published as: *Syntactic Chain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1985.

[Fundamental source and most ample discussion of the definiteness effect.](#)

Uses of the definite article

Christophersen 1939 distinguishes between *the explicit contextual*, *the implicit contextual* and *the situational basis* use for definite noun phrases. According to the contemporary terminology we will call these three main groups *anaphoric*, *relational or indirect* and *situational* use, respectively. The relational use also covers the unique use of Russell. Theories of definiteness focus on one of these uses and try to derive the

analysis for the other uses: the uniqueness theory, the familiarity theory and the salience theory. Besides these three main domains we can observe further uses of the definite article: Schwarz 2000 discusses different types of indirect definite noun phrases and their contextual restrictions. Clark 1975 introduces the term “bridging” for one type of indirect definite description (type ...*a book. The author...*), while Löbner 2003 calls this kind “associative definite description”. Fraurud 1990 and Poesio & Viera 1998 observe that we find many definite noun phrases being used to introduce new discourse items, rather than given ones. These “first-mentioned” definites pose some problems for the familiarity approach. On the other side, so-called “weak definites” are problematic for uniqueness and salience theories (Poesio 1994). Weak definite articles in German can merge with some prepositions (*Ich gehe zum (< zu+dem) Arzt*) and thus represent an interesting indicator for weak readings (Schwarz 2009). Definite articles can also be used for denoting generic objects (*The lion has a bushy tail*), see Farkas & de Swart 2005.

Clark, Herbert H. 1975. Bridging. In R. C. Schank and B. L. Nash-Webber (eds.). *Theoretical Issues in Natural Language Processing*. New York: Association for Computing Machinery. 169-174.

[First and very comprehensive discussion of the “bridging” use of the definite article.](#)

Carlson, G., R. Sussman, N. Klein and M. Tanenhaus. 2006. Weak definite NP's. In C. Davis, A. R. Deal and Y. Zabbal (eds.). *Proceedings of NELS 36*. UMass/Amherst: GLSA/Chicago. 179-196.

[In-depth treatment of weak definites and their appropriateness, with some experiments.](#)

Fraurud, Kari. 1990. Definiteness and the Processing of Noun Phrases in Natural Discourse. *Journal of Semantics* 7. 395-433.

[First and very detailed article on the “first mentioned” definites based on an extensive corpus study.](#)

Löbner, Sebastian. 2003. *Definite Associative Anaphora*, ms, *<http://user.phil-fak.uni-duesseldorf.de/~loebner/publ/DAA-03.pdf>* (10 April 2011)

[Comprehensive study on indirect definite noun phrases in associative anaphoric usages in the framework of functional definites.](#)

Poesio, Massimo (1994): Weak Definites, in: M. Harvey & L. Santelmann (eds.): *Proceedings of SALT 4*, Ithaca: CLC Publications, 282-299.

[Discussion of weak definites from a broad perspective.](#)

Poesio, Massimo and Renata Vieira. 1998. A Corpus-based Investigation of Definite Description Use. *Computational Linguistics* 24. 183-216.

[Analysis of the quantitative distribution of different types of definite noun phrases in larger corpora.](#)

Schwarz, Florian. 2009. *Two Types of Definites in Natural Language*. Dissertation. University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Exhaustive study on the weak and strong definite article in German, casted into situation semantics.

Schwarz, Monika. 2000. *Indirekte Anaphern in Texten. Studien zur domänengebundenen Referenz und Kohärenz im Deutschen*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.

Covers the full range of different kinds of indirect anaphoric definite description.

de Swart, Henriëtte and Donka Farkas. 2005. Généricité et (in)définitude. Une analyse dans la théorie de l'optimalité. In C. Dobrovie-Sorin (ed.). *Noms nus et généricité*. Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes. 97-126.

Comprehensive discussion of the generic use of the definite article.

Wilson, Deirdre & Matsui, Tomoko 1998. *Recent Approaches to Bridging: Truth, coherence, relevance*. UCL Working Papers in Linguistics 10. 173-200.

Excellent discussion of three recent approaches to bridging reference in terms of Relevance Theory.

Uniqueness theories

Russell 1905 formulates the uniqueness theory of definite noun phrases (what he and since then the philosophical as well as part of the semantic tradition calls “definite descriptions”). Strawson 1950 objects Russell’s assumption that the uniqueness is part of the assertion and introduces the concept of presupposition. Neale 1990 presents the best and most detailed defense of Russell, also integrating important material from the linguistic discussion. Ostertag 1998 provides a collection of the most relevant classical articles in this debate and Reimer & Bezuidenhout 2004 continue the discussion with contemporary contributions. Kadmon 1990 and Roberts 2003 discuss the semantic status of uniqueness and Hawkins 1978 formulates the theory as an inclusiveness condition also accounting for plural and mass definites. Löbner 1985 modifies the Russellian account into the more linguistically oriented theory of definiteness as functional dependency.

Hawkins, John. 1978. *Definiteness and Indefiniteness: A Study in Reference and Grammaticality Prediction*. London: Croom Helm.

Establishes the “inclusiveness” theory of definiteness as a combination of uniqueness and familiarity theory.

Kadmon, Nirit. 1990. Uniqueness. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 13. 273-324.

An up-to-date extensive linguistic discussion of the uniqueness theory.

Löbner, Sebastian. 1985. Definites. In *Journal of Semantics* 4. 279-326.

Formulates an important modification of the Russellian theory: definiteness is based on the concept of functional dependency.

Neale, Stephen. 1990. *Descriptions*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Most complete and intelligible defense of the Russellian theory of definite descriptions and its linguistic arguments.

Ostertag, Gary. 1998. *Definite Descriptions. A Reader*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Collection of classical articles in the analytic philosophy tradition from Frege and Russell to Grice, Kripke and Schiffer.

Reimer, Marga and Anne Bezuidenhout. 2004. *Descriptions and Beyond: An Interdisciplinary Collection of Essays on Definite and Indefinite Description*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Most inspiring documentation of the ongoing discussion on definite descriptions in up-to-date research articles.

Roberts, Craigy. 2003. Uniqueness in definite noun phrases. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 26. 287-350.
Excellent presentation of the semantic discussion on the status of the uniqueness condition.

Russell, Bertrand. 1905. On Denoting. *Mind* 14. 479-493.
Foundational article that introduces the uniqueness theory of definite noun phrases (definite descriptions).

Strawson, Peter. 1950. On Referring. *Mind* 59. 320-344.
A strong critique on Russell. Strawson introduces the concept of presupposition (based on ideas of Frege).

Familiarity

Christophersen 1939 formulates the familiarity theory, a linguistically motivated alternative to the Russellian uniqueness theory. Karttunen 1968, 1976 argues for an additional semantic-pragmatic level of discourse representation at which definiteness can be appropriately represented. Heim 1981, Kamp 1981, Kamp & Reyle 1993 combine these two ideas and develop dynamic semantic theories.

Christophersen, Paul. 1939. *The Articles. A Study of Their Theory and Use in English*. Copenhagen: Munksgaard.
The foundational work on the familiarity theory of definiteness, based on a broad synchronic and diachronic description of the articles in English.

Heim, Irene. 1982. *The Semantics of Definite and Indefinite Noun Phrases*. Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms.
Develops the file change semantics and provides a formal representation of definiteness in terms of familiarity.

Kamp, Hans 1981. A Theory of Truth and Semantic Interpretation. In: J. Groenendijk & T. Janssen & M. Stokhof (eds.). *Formal Methods in the Study of Language*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam Center. 277-322. Reprinted in: J. Groenendijk & T. M. V. Janssen & M. Stokhof (eds.). *Truth, Interpretation and Information*. Dordrecht: Foris. 1-41.
Introduces Discourse Representation Theory, in which definiteness is represented in

[terms of links between discourse referents.](#)

Kamp, Hans and Uwe Reyle. 1993. *From Discourse to Logic. Introduction to Modeltheoretic Semantics of Natural Language, Formal Logic and Discourse Representation Theory*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.

[Comprehensive textbook on Discourse Representation Theory and the familiarity theory of definiteness, including definite noun phrases and anaphoric pronouns.](#)

Karttunen, Lauri. 1976. Discourse Referents. In J. McCawley (ed.). *Syntax and Semantics 7: Notes from the Linguistic Underground*. New York: Academic Press. 363-385.

[Classical paper on the idea that noun phrases introduce discourse referents, rather than denoting "real" objects in the world.](#)

Karttunen, Lauri. 1968. *What Makes Definite Noun Phrases Definite?* RAND P-3871.

[First discussion of familiarity theory with respect to definiteness in a formal setting.](#)

Salience

The salience theory of definiteness has three historical sources: Lewis 1979 criticizes Russell's Theory of Descriptions and sketches an alternative theory using salience. Sgall et al. 1973 describe the information structure of a sentence with a hierarchy of "activated" referents. Grosz et al. 1995 argue on the basis of their analysis of discourse model in artificial intelligence that we need a salience structure. Egli & von Heusinger 1995 und von Heusinger 1997 give a formal account of salience in terms of choice functions, and Peregrin & von Heusinger 1997 embed this into a dynamic semantics. Schlenker 2004 uses this semantics for definite noun phrases and conditionals.

Egli, U. and K. von Heusinger. 1995. The Epsilon Operator and E-Type Pronouns. In U. Egli et al. (eds.). *Lexical Knowledge in the Organization of Language*. Benjamins: Amsterdam. 121-141.

[First semantic formulation of salience in terms of choice functions.](#)

Grosz, Barbara J., Aravind K. Joshi and Scott Weinstein. 1983. Providing a unified account of definite noun phrases in discourse. *Proceedings of the 21st Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics*. Cambridge, MA. 44-50.

[Accurate description of the salience structure in discourse in artificial intelligence.](#)

von Heusinger, Klaus. 1997. Salience and Definiteness. *Prague Bulletin of Mathematical Linguistics* 67. 5-23.

[Most comprehensive comparison between different theories of definiteness with focus on salience theory.](#)

Lewis, David. 1979. Scorekeeping in a Language Game. In R. Bäuerle, U. Egli and A. von Stechow (eds.). *Semantics from Different Points of View*. Berlin: Springer. 172-187.

[Argues against uniqueness on the basis of situations with two descriptively identical objects and introduces the concept of salience, instead.](#)

Peregrin, Jaroslav & von Heusinger, Klaus. 1997. Dynamic Semantics with Choice Functions. In: H. Kamp & B. Partee (eds.). *Proceedings of the Workshop „Context Dependence in the Analysis*

of *Linguistic Meaning*. Amsterdam: Elsevier. 255-274.

They develop a dynamic semantics with salience structure.

Schlenker, Philippe. 2004. Conditionals as Definite Descriptions (A Referential Analysis). *Research on Language and Computation* 2. 417–462.

Schlenker uses the salience theory for definite noun phrases and conditionals.

Sgall, Petr, Eva Hajicová and Jarmila Panevová. 1986. *Meaning of the Sentence in its Semantic and Pragmatic Aspects*. Edited by Jacob Mey. Dordrecht: Reidel.

This impressive monograph summarizes the most important research results of the Prague Linguistic Tradition on information structure and sentence interpretation. It provides challenging observations, many of which are still unaccounted for.

Definiteness and reference

Definiteness is the most prominent linguistic category in the discussion of reference in linguistics as well as in analytic philosophy. Definite noun phrases are the central issue in philosophical discussion of the foundation of reference. Definiteness is also the main semantic-pragmatic category of nominal phrases which can be contrasted with other categories or further subdivided.

Definite descriptions and analytic philosophy

Since Frege 1892, definite noun phrases are one of the main issues of investigation in analytic philosophy, as they show a challenging interaction of descriptive content and referential force in order to identify their referents. Russell 1905 argues that the unambiguous reference is licensed by the uniqueness condition. Neale 1990 is the most profound analysis of the original Russellian ideas. He unfolds the very condensed discussion and enriches it by linguistic observations. Ludlow 2007 provides a compact and updated summary of this, while Wettstein 1981 points out some flaws in the Russellian picture. Ostertag 1998 and Reimer & Bezuidenhout 2004 present very impressive collections of papers figuring prominently in this discussion and demonstrate its actuality for analytic philosophy and semantics.

Frege, Gottlob. 1892/1980. Über Sinn und Bedeutung. *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik* 100. 25–50. English translation in P. Geach and M. Black (eds.). 1980. *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*. Oxford: Blackwell. 56-78.

Founding paper of analytic philosophy. Among other issues, it discusses the semantics of definite description.

Neale, Stephen. 1990. *Descriptions*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Most comprehensive and intelligible defense of the Russellian theory of definite descriptions and their linguistic arguments.

Ludlow, Peter. 2007. Descriptions. In E. N. Zalta (ed.). *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descriptions/> (10 April 2011)

Excellent and very accessible overview of the discussion on definiteness in analytic

philosophy.

Ostertag, Gary. 1998. *Definite Descriptions. A Reader*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Collection of classical articles in the analytic philosophy tradition from Frege and Russell to Grice, Kripke and Schiffer.

Reimer, Marga and Anne Bezuidenhout. 2004. *Descriptions and Beyond: An Interdisciplinary Collection of Essays on Definite and Indefinite Description*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Wonderful documentation of the ongoing discussion on definite descriptions by up-to-date research articles.

Russell, Bertrand. 1905. On Denoting. *Mind* 14. 479-493.
Classical paper on definite description and second founding paper of analytic philosophy.

Wettstein, Howard K. 1981. Demonstrative Reference and Definite Descriptions. *Philosophical Studies* 40. 241–257.
Very prominent study that argues for a direct reference view of definite descriptions, based on the semantics of demonstratives.

Definiteness and indefiniteness

There is a clear focus on the analysis of definiteness, while indefiniteness is often taken as the complement distribution of definite expression. Thus, there are only few studies that try to develop an independent theory of indefiniteness. Corblin provides a broad discussion of different referential aspects of noun phrases. Keenan 1987 provides a semantic definition, Reuland & ter Meulen 1987 collect various competing approaches to indefiniteness. Haspelmath 1997 gives a broad typological overview of indefinite pronouns; Vogeler & Tasmowski 2006 provided an excellent collection of contributions to non-definite expression; Zimmermann 1993 analyses indefinite noun phrases in opaque contexts; von Stechow 2000 and Chierchia 2005 propose a unified semantics of definite and indefinite noun phrases based on choice functions.

Chierchia, G. 2005. Definites, locality, and intentional identity. In G. N. Carlson and F. J. Pelletier (eds.). *Reference and Quantification: The Partee Effect*. Stanford: CSLI Publications. 143–177.
Presents convincing arguments for a common semantics of definite and indefinite noun phrases as choice function terms.

Corblin, Francis 1987. *Indéfini, défini et démonstratif. Constructions linguistiques de la référence*. Geneva: Droz.
This monograph provides a very accessible theoretically informed overview on different types of noun phrases.

Keenan, Edward L. 1987. A Semantic Definition of Indefinite NP. In Eric J. Reuland and Alice ter Meulen. *The Representation of (In)definiteness*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 286-317.

[Canonical contribution to the semantic definition of definite and indefinite noun phrases.](#)

Reuland, Eric and Alice ter Meulen (eds.). 1987. *The Representation of (In)definites*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

[Splendid collection of the best articles on the semantics of indefinites and definites.](#)

Haspelmath, Martin. 1997. *Indefinite Pronouns*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

[Best source for indefinite pronouns, their function examined comparatively in several unrelated languages.](#)

von Heusinger, Klaus 2000. The Reference of Indefinites. In K. von Heusinger and U. Egli (eds.). *Reference and Anaphoric Relations*. Dordrecht: Kluwer. 247-265.

[Comprehensive study on choice function terms representing definite and indefinite noun phrases.](#)

Vogeleer, Svetlana & Tasmowski, Liliane (eds). 2006. *Non-definiteness and Plurality*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

[This collection of studies by leading scholars in the field focuses on the semantics of non-definite \(bare and indefinite\) plural NPs.](#)

Zimmermann, Thomes Ede 1993. On the Proper Treatment of Opacity in Certain Verbs. *Natural Language Semantics* 1, 149-179.

[Best study on indefinite noun phrases in opaque contexts with a detailed semantic analysis.](#)

Definiteness and referentiality, and the referential vs. attributive contrast

Givón 1978 distinguishes between the semantic concept “referentiality” and the discourse-pragmatic concept “definiteness”. Donnellan 1966 starts one of the most ardent discussions on the nature of definite noun phrases: He distinguishes two semantic types: a referential and an attributive (or Russellian) meaning. Kripke 1977 argues that the contrast is pragmatic in nature and an inference from the contrast between sentence meaning and speaker’s meaning. Dekker 1998 argues that the contrast expresses information about the “referential intention” of the speaker, but is not truth functional. Keenan & Ebert 1973 provide in their study data from two languages that encode the contrast in different definite articles.

Dekker, Paul. 1998. Speaker's Reference, Descriptions, and Information Structure. *Journal of Semantics* 15. 305-334.

[An ample overview of the discussion of the status of “referential intentions” and its embedding into a dynamic semantics.](#)

Donnellan, Keith. 1966. Reference and Definite Descriptions. *Philosophical Review* 75. 281-304.

[Classical paper that introduces the contrast between the referential and the attributive reading of definite descriptions.](#)

Givón, Talmy. 1978. Definiteness and Referentiality. In J. Greenberg, C. Ferguson and E.

Moravcsik (eds.). *Universals of Human Language* Vol. 4. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 291-330.

Givón argues that referentiality is a semantic property, while definiteness is a discourse-pragmatic one.

Keenan, Edward and Karen Ebert. 1973. A Note in Marking Transparency and Opacity. *Linguistic Inquiry* 4. 421-424.

Excellent study focused on the referential vs. attributive contrast in two languages with two definite article forms.

Kripke, Saul. 1977. Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference. In P. French, T. Uehling and H. Wettstein (eds.). *Midwest Studies in Philosophy II: Studies in the Philosophy of Language*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 255–276.

Contradicts Donnellan and argues that the contrast originates from the pragmatic distinction between semantic meaning and speaker's meaning.

Definiteness and the specific vs. non-specific contrast

Definiteness effects are also often triggered by specificity, a semantic-pragmatic category that expresses “speaker's intention” (Fodor & Sag 1982), discourse linking (Enç 1991) or more generally referentially anchored indefinites (von Heusinger 2002, 2011). Prince 1981 shows that there is an employ of the demonstrative *this* that is specific, and Ionin 2006 elaborates this claim and provides a typology of different article systems – differentiating either between specific and non-specific or between definite and indefinite.

Enç, Mürvet. 1991. The Semantics of Specificity. *Linguistic Inquiry* 22. 1-25.

This article discusses specificity as discourse anchoring and illustrates the use on differential object marking in Turkish.

Fodor, Janet and Sag, Ivan. 1982. Referential and Quantificational Indefinites. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 5, 355-398.

The seminal paper on the linguistic contrast between specific vs. non-specific readings and relevant triggering parameters.

Ionin, Tanja. 2006. This is definitely specific: specificity and definiteness in article systems. *Natural Language Semantics* 14. 175-234.

Formalizes Prince's observation that the demonstrative *this* can be used specifically.

von Heusinger, Klaus. 2002. Specificity and Definiteness in Sentence and Discourse Structure. *Journal of Semantics* 19. 245-274.

The article discusses the similarities and dissimilarities of definite and specific readings of noun phrases.

von Heusinger, Klaus 2011. Specificity. In C. Maienborn, K. von Heusinger and P. Portner (eds.). *Semantics: An international handbook of natural language meaning* Vol. 2. Berlin: de Gruyter.

The article provides a comprehensive overview of specificity and proposes seven different subtypes thereof.

Prince, E. 1981. On the Inferencing of Indefinite-this NPs. In A. Joshi, B. Webber, and I. Sag (eds.). *Elements of Discourse Understanding*. Cambridge: CUP. 231-250.

Prince observes that both definite and indefinite NPs exhibit different 'ways of referring':

Definiteness and discourse

Definiteness, understood as a discourse-pragmatic category, is central for the understanding of text coherence. On the other hand, discourse structure is constitutive for definite expressions. Du Bois 1980 and Grosz, Joshi & Weinstein 1983 lay the fundamentals for a discourse pragmatic understanding of definiteness, which is further developed in Pinkal 1986. Chafe 1976 and Prince 1982 relate definiteness to information structure and Clark & Marshall 1981 relate it to mutual knowledge.

Du Bois, John. 1980. Beyond Definiteness: The Trace of Identity in Discourse. In W. Chafe (ed.). *The Pear Stories. Cognitive, Cultural and Linguistic Aspects of Narrative Production*. Norwood, N.J.: ALEX. 203-274.

This article convincingly argues that definiteness is systematically related to the structure of discourse.

Chafe, Wallace. 1976. Givenness, Contrastiveness, Definiteness, Subjects, Topics, and Point of View. In C. Li (ed.). *Subject and Topic*. New York: Academic Press.

Very clear contribution to the different notions of givenness and definiteness with respect to information structure.

Clark, Herbert and Catherine Marshall. 1981. Definite Reference and Mutual Knowledge. In A. Joshi, B. Webber and I. Sag (eds.). *Elements of Discourse Understanding*. Cambridge: CUP. 10-63.

This seminal article discusses the dialogical function of the definite article. The speaker signals that speaker and hearer can use common knowledge.

Grosz, Barbara J., Aravind K. Joshi and Scott Weinstein. 1983. Providing a unified account of definite noun phrases in discourse. *Proceedings of the 21st Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics*. Cambridge, MA. 44-50.

Excellent paper on the function of definite expressions in discourse.

Pinkal, Manfred. 1986. Definite Noun Phrases and the Semantics of Discourse. In *Proceedings of Coling 86, Bonn*. 368-373.

This study elaborates on the function of definite expressions in discourse and describes their semantics.

Prince, Ellen F. 1992. The ZPG Letter: Subjects, Definiteness and Information Status. In S. Thompson and W. Mann (eds.). *Discourse Description: Diverse analyses of a fund raising text*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 295-325.

Seminal paper on the discourse notion of definiteness, illustrated by an impressively

[broad corpus.](#)

Definiteness, anaphoricity and E-type pronouns

Anaphoric expressions are definite, and some theories represent a subclass of anaphoric pronouns, so-called E-type pronouns, as definite noun phrases, which raises interesting questions about the semantics of both the anaphoric pronoun and the corresponding definite noun phrase. Chastain 1975 provides original and very clear observations with respect to the function of definite noun phrases in discourse. Bosch 1983 represents an extensive study on the analysis of definite expressions in discourse. Evans 1980 introduces the concept of E-type pronouns, which is extensively defended by Elbourne 2001, while Heim 1990 gives a more balanced view on this analysis.

Bosch, Peter. 1983. *Agreement and Anaphora*. New York: Academic Press.

[Very competent and informed overview of the different approaches to anaphoric expressions.](#)

Chastain, Charles. 1975. Reference and Context. In K. Gunderson (ed.). *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science, Vol. VII: Language, Mind, and Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 194-269.

[This article discusses for the first time the dependency of definite expressions from other expressions in a text and thus introduces the concepts of “referential chain” and “referentially linked”.](#)

Evans, Gareth. 1980. Pronouns. *Linguistic Inquiry* 11. 337-362.

[Foundational paper that introduces and defends the concept of E-type pronouns.](#)

Elbourne, Paul. 2001. E-Type Anaphora as NP-Deletion. *Natural Language Semantics* 9. 241-188.

[Elaborates on the concept of E-type pronouns, which are understood and represented as shortened definite descriptions.](#)

Heim, Irene. 1990. E-Type Pronouns and Donkey Anaphora. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 13. 137-177.

[Seminal paper that compares theories of anaphoric pronouns: a dynamic binding approach vs. an E-type pronoun approach.](#)

Definiteness hierarchies

Definite expressions like proper names, demonstratives, and definite and indefinite noun phrases are often aligned in various types of hierarchies, based on different underlying concepts of (discourse) accessibility. Bolinger 1977 provides a first scale based on the behavior of expressions in these contexts. Prince 1981 merges different contrasts in one taxonomy of given-new information, Ariel 1988 proposes the Accessibility Marking Scale and Gundel, Hedland & Zacharski 1993 present the Givenness Hierarchy, based on the

cognitive status of the expression. Other types of definiteness or referentiality hierarchies are based on the grammatical behavior in constructions such as differential object marking (Aissen 2003).

Ariel, Mira. 1988. Referring and Accessibility. *Journal of Linguistics* 24. 65-87.

[Introduces the Accessibility Marking Scale, based on the accessibility properties of noun phrases.](#)

Aissen, Judith. 2003. Differential Object Marking: Iconicity vs. Economy. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 21. 435-483.

[Argues that differential object marking depends on the definiteness hierarchy based on the DP-type and the descriptive content of definite expressions.](#)

Bolinger, Dwight. 1977. "There". In: *Meaning and Form*. London: Longman. 90-123.

[Provides a first scale of different noun phrases based on their acceptability in different there-constructions.](#)

Gundel, Jeannette, Nancy Hedberg and Ron Zacharski. 1993. Cognitive Status and the Form of Referring Expressions in Discourse. *Language* 69. 274-307.

[Seminal paper on the cognitively justified scale, including indefinite expressions.](#)

Prince, Ellen. 1981. Toward a taxonomy of given-new information. In P. Cole (ed.). *Radical Pragmatics*. New York: Academic Press. 223-255.

[This groundbreaking paper merges three different contrasts into one taxonomy of different definite and indefinite expression, which forms the base of many other hierarchies.](#)

Definiteness and language acquisition

Definiteness as one of the core notion of semantics and pragmatics is also one of the most researched notion in language acquisition from different points of view. Maratsos 1976 is a groundbreaking work on the use of definite and indefinite reference, followed by Karmiloff-Smith, which investigates language acquisition primarily on the acquisition of determiners, including definite and indefinite articles, Ionin & Ko & Wexler 2004 provide an indepth study of the article semantics, Dasinger 1995 focuses on Finnish and Küntay 2002 on Turkish – both languages without definite article.

Dasinger, L. 1995. The development of discourse competence in native Finnish speaking children: A study of the expression of definiteness. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.

[This in depth study of Finnish discourse structure provides many very challenging results to definiteness and discourse structure in a language without definite article.](#)

Maratsos, Michael. 1976. *The Use of Definite and Indefinite Reference in Young Children*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This groundbreaking monograph presents crucial insights into the acquisition of the definite and indefinite article.

Küntay, Aylin. 2002. Development of the Expression of Indefiniteness: Presenting New referents in Turkish Picture-series Stories. *Discourse Processes*, 33, 77-101.

This excellent study of the different ways to express indefiniteness in Turkish combines empirical material with theoretical assumptions.

Ionin, Tania & Ko, Heejeong & Wexler, Ken 2004. Article Semantics in L2 Acquisition: The Role of Specificity. *Language and Acquisition* 12. 3-69.

This article is an exemplary detailed discussion of the semantics of the articles and the question whether children first acquire definiteness or specificity.

Karmiloff-Smith, Annette. 1981. *A functional approach to child language: A study of determiners and reference.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This seminal work introduces the research on articles in child languages and lays the foundation for most of the subsequent work.