

## GENERAL MEANING RELATION - DEFINITE / INDEFINITE MEANING IN NOUN CLASS



### Linguistics

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### Abstract

*The general meaning of a word is the representation of the type from it, in linguistic contexts and certain grammatical forms and this meaning is opposed to the individualized meaning, the separation of a unique item of the type, distinguishable from others.* The general meaning seems like a grammatical meaning that is not formally sufficiently marked, but the indefinite articles and the suffixes, in addition to other grammatical meanings, can also express a general meaning in certain contexts. A definite meaning of the noun is generally considered the meaning of the noun in the definite form and indefinite meaning the one of the indefinite noun. But how does the *general meaning* relate to them? Nouns with *general meaning* whether in the indefinite form or in the definite form are *meaningfully definite*. Both the speaker and the listener know the class that the general noun marks. Despite the formal indefiniteness / definiteness, nouns with a general meaning are semantically definite.

The lexical-grammatical unit that serves to name the whole type, or actions, states or ideas that belong to the type is a unit with a general meaning. *The general meaning of a word is to represent the type of it, in linguistic contexts and certain grammatical forms.* The general meaning is opposed to the individualized meaning, the separation of a unique thing of the kind, distinguishable from others.

*Nouns, pronouns, verbs and some adjectives* have the general meaning. The lexical-grammatical unit with general meaning can refer to: a) a member, representative of the type, which becomes such based on one or more common features of it with the type it belongs to. It holds the values and features of the class and at the same time it represents each of its individuals.

This member, representative of each individual of the type, is different from a particular element of the type, is different from a specific, individual element, and opposes a concrete individual of the class that enjoys certain special, distinctive features; b) actions, states or ideas in general that refer to individuals / objects that represent the type, class, as opposed to a particular state, action or idea, referring to specific individuals / objects.

*Generalization* in the Albanian language is not significantly based on formal grammatical criteria. There are no specialized forms to give us *general meaning*<sup>1</sup>. The general meaning seems like a grammatical meaning that is not formally sufficiently marked, but the indefinite articles and

<sup>1</sup> To specify individualized/ generalized ambiguity, French has formal elements, such as the structure of the type Art (article)+ N (noun), *c'est (this) + SV (verbal syntagm) or ça + SV: The cat is affectionate . Le chat est affectueux (spécifique); A cat is affectionate. Le chat, c'est affectueux (générique).*

the definite endings, in addition to other grammatical meanings, can also express a general meaning in certain contexts:

*A good **book** finds the market itself.*  
***The good book** finds the market itself.*  
*Good **books** find the market themselves.*

*Një **libër** i mirë e gjen tregun vetë.*  
***Libri** i mirë e gjen tregun vetë.*  
***Librat** e mirë e gjejnë tregun vetë.*

For this reason, *generalization* is for us a *grammatical-semantic category*, for the examination of which arises the need for semantic and grammatical analyzes, where the most important role in avoiding ambiguity *general meaning / individualized meaning* in a certain use, is occupied by linguistic context. Only in the user structure can it be determined whether a particular lexical unit or construction is used in a *general or individualized meaning*. Context allows or excludes general interpretation.

But what is the relation of the *general meaning to the definite / indefinite meaning* in the noun?

Generally the meaning of the name in the definite form is called ascertain meaning of the noun and indefinite meaning that of the indefinite noun. Cipo (1949) and the Grammar of the Academy (1995) recognize the definite form of the noun in opposition to its indefinite form, as it responds to the grammatical meaning of definite and indefinite.

Shaban Demiraj (1972) specifies: "The terms definite / indefinite are used according to the Albanian grammatical tradition, to point out whether the noun under consideration is supplied with proper articles or not. Whereas definite / indefinite terms are used to indicate whether the noun under consideration is meaningfully definite or indefinite. A noun is meaningfully defined, when it signifies one or several things, which the speaker introduces as known not only by him but also by the interlocutor. Whereas the noun is semantically indefinite when it signifies one or several things, which the speaker introduces as known only by him and, consequently, unknown by the interlocutor." (Demiraj, 1972, 25-26)

Rami Memushaj (2008)<sup>2</sup> sees definiteness / indefiniteness as a typical category of noun (general) found in several languages, which can mark either the whole class of items, or one of the items in the class. For him in the first case the name is used with a general meaning, in the other case with an individualized meaning. "Therefore, individualism, which is a logical concept, in language corresponds to the semantic category indefinite meaning / definite meaning, which is formally expressed by means of indefinite articles respectively definite." (Memushaj, 2008, 222)<sup>3</sup>

In Oda Buchholz and Wilfried Fiedler's grammar we point out: "The *definite / indefinite* morphological category is manifested in the existence of two forms of the noun: definite form /

<sup>2</sup> "Hyrije në gjuhësi", Tiranë, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Memushaj sees the use of articles as a means of expressing the degree of individualization of the noun, whereas their absence as indicators of general meaning.

indefinite form. The main function of the category of definiteness / indefiniteness is related to the expression of the functional-semantic category of determinacy / indeterminacy, which are defined (mainly) in the communication process, in the communicative situation or in the context, but are also related to the referential meaning of nouns.

For the expression of the definite / indefinite category, the Albanian language is served by a number of means that belong to different grammatical layers. Different means of expression, which can be combined, towards the functional-semantic category of definiteness / indefiniteness and between them have complicated interrelationships. On the one hand the choice of expressive means is determined by the functional-semantic category, on the other hand the definite / indefinite morphological reflexes, greatly depend on the structure of the noun group, which is influenced by both the choice of lexical means and the syntactic function of noun group.”<sup>4</sup>

Georges Kleiber<sup>5</sup> presents the definite/indefinite opposition on three levels: the morphological plane (the definite/indefinite article); syntactic or functional plan (with determiners); the notion plan, where the definite/indefinite change corresponds to a conceptual, semantic or pragmatic opposition, independently of the morphological or syntactic categories.

Kleiber combines in a double relation the three above mentioned plans: the relation of the formal to the notional plan and the hierarchical relationship between the three plans. The relation established between these plans seems to be equivocal: *If we have a noun component, PE (SN) semantically defined / non - defined, we give the value of definiteness/indefiniteness to the articles, but this can lead to inconsistencies between the semantic definite and morphological definite / indefinite; we can come to a semantically indefinite PE (SN) but which has a definite article or, on the contrary, a semantically definite PE (SN) but with an indefinite article.*<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> “Die morphologische Kategorie der Bestimmtheit / Unbestimmtheit (i. folg. kurz: Kategorie der Bestimmtheit) manifestiert sich in der Existenz zweier Formens des Nomens, die sich auf grund der Anwesenheit bzw. Abwesenheit des Bestimmtheits Zeichens (BZ) unterscheiden: bestimmte Form (mit BZ) - unbestimmte Form (ohne BZ) ... Die Hauptfunktion der morphologischen Kategorie der Bestimmtheit besteht im Ausdruck der funktional-semanticen Kategorie der Determiniertheit / Indeterminiertheit, deren Unterkategorien Determiniertheit und Indeterminiertheit (i. folg auch als Merkmale: determiniert / indeterminiert) im wesentlichen durch die Gegebenheiten des Kommunikationsprozesses, ins besondere durch den sprachlichen Kontext (kontextuelle Bedingungen) und die jeweilige Kommunikationssituation (konsituative Bedingungen), sowie durch die referentielle Bedeutung der Nomin abestimmt werden. Zum Ausdruck der Kategorie der Determiniertheit/Indeterminiertheit verfügt das Alb. über eine Reihe von Mitteln, die verschiedenen Ebenen der Grammatik angehören.... Die verschiedenen Ausdrucksmittel, die auch kombiniert auftreten, stehen zur funktional-semanticen Kategorie der Determiniertheit / Indeterminiertheit und zu einander in komplizierten Wechselbeziehungen. Einerseits wird die Wahl der Ausdrucksmittel weitgehend durch die funktional-semanticen Kategorie bestimmt, andererseits hängen die morphologischen Reflexe der Determiniertheit/Indeterminiertheit in besonderem Maße von der Struktur der NG, die auch durch die Wahl der lexikalischen Mittel beeinflusst wird, und von der syntaktischen Funktion der NG ab.” pg. 233.

<sup>5</sup> Georges Kleiber, “What is (in)definite?” (“Qu’est-ce qui est (in)défini?”, *Faits de langues*, 1994/4

<sup>6</sup> “... si un SN est considéré comme sémantiquement définie ou indéfini, on pourra porter au crédit du déterminant cette valeur définie ou indéfinie et donc parler de déterminant définie ou indéfini. Une telle ‘descente’ peut alors conduire à un discordance révélatrice entre la définitude sémantique et le défini/indéfini morphologique, puisqu’en plus des passages congruent l’opération peut aboutir sur un SN sémantiquement indéfini, mais qui possède un article définie ou, inversement, sur un SN sémantiquement définie, mais avec un article indéfini.”Right there, pg.86.

To solve these cases, Kleiber lists 4 different reasons why an EP (SN) can be defined as definite / indefinite:

- Because it contains a definite/indefinite article (defined/non defined);
- Because it has a definite/indefinite determiner;
- Because it is itself a separate definite / indefinite formal category;
- "Because it corresponds to the definite / indefinite semantic notion, despite a particular expression."<sup>7</sup>

As we can see from the examples, the distinction cannot always be made between them. We move from one level to another because levels are interrelated and the hierarchical relationship and connection between form and content make a syntactic component definite / indefinite. And Kleiber himself is not very pleased with it, because the notion definite / indefinite, though it has obvious connections, may not be the same at all four levels, but he considers valid at least three formal levels of the article, the determinant and of the noun component (SN). The definite / indefinite definition must consider the relationship that exists between the three levels and can explain the role of the article in the definite / indefinite character of the determinant and its role in the definite / indefinite status of the component.

Let's analyze the cases:

*I know **a man** who does this job.*and

*I know **the man** who does this job.*

How would we explain these two examples of indefinite meaning? There are both cases where the **type** is known by the speaker and not by the listener. But, on the other hand, only the first case, the noun with indefinite articles is morphologically and semantically indefinite, in the second case the noun is definite, morphologically definite and semantically indefinite.

As noted, one of the plans, e.g. the morphological or syntactic one is insufficient in certain cases to define the noun as meaningfully definite / indefinite. Therefore, we can refer to the Kleiber's solution, to look at each of the levels so as to give a more accurate definition.

So determinism is not always related to the definite form of the noun and indefiniteness to its indefinite form. And Demiraj notes that the terms definite / indefinite do not fully correspond to the terms meaningfully defined / non defined.

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<sup>7</sup> "i. parcequ'il comporte un défini ou un indéfini morphologique (article défini ou article indéfini ou autre morphème dit *indéfini*).  
 ii. parce qu'il a pour déterminant un déterminant dit *défini* ou *indéfini*.  
 iii. parce qu'il est lui-même, c'est-à-dire en tant que catégorie formelle particulière, défini ou indéfini.  
 iv. parce qu'il répond à la notion sémantique de *défini* ou *indéfini* déterminée indépendamment d'une expression particulière." Right there, pg. 87.

It seems that this situation is further complicated by nouns with a general meaning that are both in the definite form and in the indefinite one. How would we define them?

Demiraj thinks that definite / indefinite opposition can be obtained by all nouns that name concrete objects or countable, individualized abstract things, which name one or several samples of a class, not the whole class. "... This semantic contradiction cannot be obtained when a general noun is used to name the whole respective class, i.e., when it is used with a general (categorical) meaning. A noun with a general meaning, whether in the indefinite or in the definite form, is meaningfully definite; in whatever form it serves to distinguish a class of homogeneous objects from the classes of other objects. In such circumstances, one cannot speak of categories of definiteness and indefiniteness, as long as the formal opposition does not respond to the respective semantic opposition" (Demiraj, 1972, 27)

For Demiraj, in the case of nouns with a general meaning, the use of the definite or indefinite form *has a purely formal character and is conditioned by the syntactic function*, while *the general meaning*, according to him, is not attributed to the definite article, but to *the general noun itself as a denominator of the whole relevant class*. As noted, Demiraj sees nouns with a general meaning meaningfully defined.

For Kleiber a general indefinite SN (*Un chien*) is semantically definite because it has the object of the dog class, but morphologically indefinite (indefinite article).

Demiraj and Kleiber's thesis that nouns with *general meaning*, whether in indefinite form or in definite form are *meaningfully definite*, seems right to us. Both the speaker and the listener know the class which marks the general noun.

Despite the formal indefiniteness / definiteness, nouns with a general meaning are semantically definite.<sup>8</sup>

In conclusion, *nouns with a general meaning*, whether in the indefinite form or in the definite form, are *meaningfully definite*. Despite the formal indefiniteness / definiteness, nouns with a general meaning are semantically definite. Both the speaker and the listener know the class marked by *the noun with a general meaning*.

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<sup>8</sup> In English we see that definiteness relates to something identifiable in a given context or in the general knowledge possessed by the speaker and listener which can be considered a *reference to the situation*. *The reference to the situation is immediate* (immediate) or *larger*, which (the last one) often corresponds to uses with general meaning (*larger situational reference often overlaps with generic use*). (Sidney Greenbaum, Randolph Quirk, 1990, 78).

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