

# The Certain Uses of *the* in L2-English\*

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## 1. Introduction

It is well-known that learners of English as a second language (L2) have difficulty acquiring English articles. In particular, learners often use articles inappropriately – i.e., they do not appear to have mastered the semantics of English articles. While much work has been devoted to article use in L2-English (Huebner 1983, Master 1987, Thomas 1989, Murphy 1997, among others), there is to our knowledge no consensus regarding the interpretation that underlies article choice in L2-English.

If L2-grammar is UG-constrained, then we would expect learners' errors to be systematic: errors in article use should reflect parameter settings or feature specifications that are allowed by UG, but that are inappropriate for English. For instance, L2-learners may associate *the* not with definiteness but with a different semantic feature. In this paper, we will argue that this is indeed the case – that L2-learners frequently associate *the* with *referentiality* (cf. Fodor and Sag 1982). We argue that L2-grammar is UG-constrained – that L2-learners have access to the semantic features of definiteness and referentiality. We will suggest that errors in article use stem from L2-learners' inability to decide which of these semantic features is appropriate for the division of articles in English. We differ from previous L2-literature (e.g., Huebner 1983, Thomas 1989), which considers the *de re / de dicto* distinction to be instrumental in article choice in L2-English. We will show that this distinction does not in fact play a role in article choice, whereas referentiality does. Evidence for our proposal comes from two studies with adult L1-Russian learners of English. Since Russian has no articles and no direct way of coding for definiteness or specificity<sup>1</sup>, it is unlikely that our results are due to transfer.

Since the terminology surrounding article interpretation is quite varied, we provide some basic (and necessarily oversimplified) definitions of the terms that we will be using in this paper; examples illustrating the terminology are also provided below.

### Definitions

1. **Definiteness**: a DP is **definite** if its referent is known to both speaker and hearer, and is unique in the contextually relevant domain. Otherwise, the DP is **indefinite**.  
*definite*: I read a book. The book was interesting.  
*indefinite*: I read a book yesterday.
2. **Referentiality**: an indefinite DP is **referential** if the speaker has its referent 'in mind' and intends to refer to it. Otherwise, the DP is **quantificational**.  
*referential indefinite*: I read an interesting book, which my cousin gave me.  
*quantificational indefinite*: Mary read a book (but I don't know which one).
3. The **de re / de dicto** distinction: an indefinite DP is **de re** if it is not in the scope of an operator such as an intensional verb, a modal, or negation<sup>2</sup>. Otherwise, the DP is **de dicto**.

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<sup>1</sup> Russian has some indirect ways of coding for definiteness, including word order (see Bailyn 1995, Ch. 3, and the references cited therein). This is not directly relevant for our studies.

<sup>2</sup> We extend the traditional use of the term *de re* to cover sentences with no intensional verbs, modals, or negation, since in the absence of another operator, the DP necessarily takes widest scope.

- de re* indefinite: I'd like to meet a famous writer – I really like her books.  
*de dicto* indefinite: I'd like to meet a famous writer – any famous writer will do.

This paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we briefly go over the relevant linguistic background. Section 3 reports our first study of articles in L2-English. Our more detailed second study is discussed in Section 4. Section 5 concludes the paper.

## 2. Linguistic background: Models of article classification

In this section, we briefly consider two models of article classification: the *de re* / *de dicto* distinction and the referential/quantificational distinction, and talk about their relevance for analyzing articles in L2-acquisition.

### 2.1 The *de re* / *de dicto* distinction

Many studies of L1 as well as L2 that have looked at acquisition of English articles have classified articles based on two features: specific reference and hearer knowledge. This classification stems from Bickerton (1981) / Huebner (1983). The term *specific reference* corresponds to a *de re* reading: a DP is said to have a specific referent when the referent<sup>3</sup> exists in our world *w*, i.e., when the DP is not in the scope of an intensional verb, a modal, or negation. A DP with no specific referent is *de dicto*, since it is in the scope of an operator. We will use the terms *de re* and *de dicto* throughout this paper, rather than the somewhat confusing term *specific reference*.

In this framework, definite DPs are *de re* as well as *known to hearer*: thus, *the cat* in (1a) exists in our world *w* and is contextually salient / known to the hearer. Indefinite DPs are necessarily *unknown to hearer* and can be either *de re* (*a cat* in (1b)) or *de dicto* (*a cat* in (1c)). We do not discuss the fourth logical possibility (*de dicto*, known to hearer) which Huebner (1983) assigns to generic DPs.

- (1) a) I saw a cat yesterday. The cat was drinking milk. [de re, hearer knowledge]  
 b) Rosalyn has a cat. [de re, no hearer knowledge]  
 c) I would like to own a cat (any cat will do). [de dicto, no hearer knowledge]

This classification, or ones similar to it, have been used by L1 researchers (e.g., Brown 1973:340-50, Cziko 1986) as well as L2 researchers (e.g., Huebner 1983; Master 1987; Parrish 1987; Tarone and Parrish 1988; Thomas 1989; Young 1996; Murphy 1997; Robertson 2000). For example, Huebner (1983) and Master (1987) argued that L2-English learners associate *the* with hearer knowledge, while Thomas (1989) argued that learners associate *the* with specific reference (i.e., *de re* readings).

While English morphologically encodes the feature *hearer knowledge* (definiteness) in its article system, other languages encode the *de re* / *de dicto* distinction instead. This is the case for Salish languages; Matthewson (1998, 1999) shows that St'at'imcets (Lillooet Salish) uses one article type for wide scope (*de re*) DPs (including definites), and a different article for narrow scope (*de dicto*) DPs.

### 2.2 Referentiality

In their work on English indefinites, Fodor and Sag (1982) argued that indefinites are ambiguous between a *referential* and a *quantificational* reading. This distinction is crucially different from the *de re* / *de dicto* distinction discussed in the previous section. Fodor and Sag argue that *a man* receives different readings in (2a) and (2b) (even though it is *de re* in both cases). In (2a), the speaker has a particular individual in mind when she utters *a man*, and in (2b), she does not.

- (2) a) A man just proposed to me in the orangery (though I'm much too embarrassed to tell you who it was).

<sup>3</sup> This classification system treats (wide-scope) indefinites as referring expressions, contrary to standard semantic analyses of indefinites (see Heim 1991 and the references cited therein).

- b) A man is in the women's bathroom (but I haven't dared to go in there to see who it is).  
(Fodor and Sag, ex.(7) and (8))

Fodor and Sag argue that (2a) is an example of the referential reading of an indefinite: *a man* there is a referring expression which picks out a particular individual in the world. On the other hand, *a man* in (2b) is a quantificational expression, similar to *every man* or *no man*. Evidence for this ambiguity comes from the un-quantifier like behavior of indefinites in certain contexts: indefinites can scope out of *if*-clauses and other scope islands, whereas quantifiers like *every*, *many*, *no*, etc., cannot. Without going into the details of Fodor and Sag's analysis, we will adopt their view that indefinites can be either regular quantifiers or referring expressions (but see Reinhart 1997, Winter 1997, and Kratzer 1998 for alternative analyses involving choice-functions). We adopt the semantics of referential and quantificational indefinites as given in Heim (1991), in (3) and (4), respectively.

(3) *Referential indefinites*

"A sentence of the form  $[a_r \zeta] \xi$  expresses a proposition only in those utterance contexts  $c$  where the speaker intends to refer to exactly one individual  $a$  and  $a$  is  $\zeta$  in  $c$ . When this condition is fulfilled,  $[a_r \zeta] \xi$  expresses that proposition which is true at an index  $i$  if  $a$  is  $\xi$  at  $i$  and false otherwise." (Heim 1991:30)

(4) *Quantificational indefinites*

"A sentence of the form  $[a \zeta] \xi$  expresses that proposition which is true if there is at least one individual which is both  $\zeta$  and  $\xi$ , and false otherwise." (Heim 1991:26)

Referential indefinites must be *de re*: if the speaker intends to refer to a particular individual, that individual must exist in the world. However, quantificational indefinites may be either *de re* or *de dicto*. This is illustrated in (5).

(5) The *de re* / *dicto* distinction vs. the referential / quantificational distinction

<i>De re?</i>	<i>Referential?</i>	<i>Example</i>
no	no	Sarah would like to make <u>a new friend</u> .
yes	no	Clara met <u>a friend</u> at yesterday's party (but I have no idea which friend).
yes	yes	Rosamund has <u>a good friend, whom I've also been friends with for years</u> .

Definite DPs (in their most frequent use) are obligatorily referential – when the speaker uses *the cat* in (1a), the speaker necessarily intends to refer to a particular cat (which is, furthermore, known to the speaker). We do not address the special cases of narrow scope or attributive definites in this paper, but see Heim (1991), Lyons (1999) for discussion.

The referentiality distinction appears to be encoded in some Polynesian languages (cf. Chung 1978). For instance, according to Lyons (1999:58), Samoan uses one article for referential DPs (including definites) and a different article for non-referential (indefinite) DPs.

### 2.3 Summary and relevance to L2-acquisition

In the previous two sections, we discussed three ways of classifying articles: definiteness, referentiality, and the *de re* / *de dicto* distinctions. The possible combinations of properties are summarized in (6). Definiteness entails referentiality, which entails a *de re* reading.

## 6. Article specifications: a summary

article used in English	definiteness (hearer knowledge)	referentiality (speaker intent)	existence in the world ( <i>de re</i> reading)
the	+	+	+
a	-	+	+
a	-	-	+
a	-	-	-

We now come back to articles in L2-acquisition. Previous literature (e.g., Huebner 1983, Master 1987, Thomas 1989) showed that L2-learners tend to overgenerate *the* in indefinite contexts. If L2-learners are sensitive to UG-based semantic distinctions, there are at least two possible accounts for this error: the learners could be associating *the* with *de re* readings, or with referentiality. The former was proposed by Thomas (1989); however, Thomas's data do not fully support this hypothesis, since overuse of *the* in *de re* indefinite contexts in her study was lower than expected (see the discussion in Thomas 1989).

To our knowledge, no one has previously looked at referentiality in L2-English. We suggest that referentiality is relevant for L2 article choice, and advance the following hypothesis:

- (7) L2-English learners associate *the* with referentiality.

The table in (8) compares the predictions made by our hypothesis to the predictions made by previous literature (e.g., Thomas 1989), which has looked at the *de re* / *de dicto* distinction.

## (8) Predictions for article use in L2-English

context code	semantic property			article used in L1-English	article that L2-learners will use if...	
	definiteness	referentiality	<i>de re</i> reading		they associate <i>the</i> with referentiality	they associate <i>the</i> with the <i>de re</i> reading
A	+	+	+	the	the	the
B	-	+	+	a	the	the
C	-	-	+	a	a	the
D	-	-	-	a	a	a

## 3. Study 1: Translation

The goal of our first, exploratory, study was to test article use in various definite and indefinite contexts, trying to tease apart referentiality and the *de re* / *de dicto* distinction.

## 3.1 Methods

The task used in this study was written translation. The participants read a short story in their L1 (Russian); 56 of the sentences in the story were underlined and numbered. The participants were directed to write translations of the underlined sentences next to the corresponding number of the answer sheet. The 56 sentences involved 14 different context types, four items per context type. Four of the context types are relevant for our discussion and are reported here. The context types not discussed include plurals, generics, and other contexts not directly relevant to this paper.

The four relevant context types are as follows: definite, referential indefinite, non-referential *de re* indefinite, and non-referential *de dicto* indefinite. Definite contexts (9a) all involved previous mention of the referent. Referential indefinite contexts (9b) all involved modifiers like *certain* or *specific*; according to Fodor and Sag (1982), these modifiers are indicators of referentiality in indefinites. Non-referential *de re* contexts (9c) involved simple first-mention indefinites with no scope interactions: in

the absence of *certain* modification or any descriptive information about the referent, there is no reason to think that the speaker in (9c) intends to refer to a particular toy. Finally, *de dicto* indefinites (9d) all involved DPs in the scope of an intensional verb or a modal operator.

The examples given here are the target English translations. The sentences on the actual test were in Russian and thus involved no articles.

- (9) a) A police car went by... The car was going very quickly<sup>4</sup>.  
 b) She wanted to see a certain painting.  
 c) Lena bought her cousin a toy.  
 d) I want to have a dog.

Participants in this study were 12 adult L1-Russian learners of English. Their age range was 20 to 54 (mean = 41). While most of the participants had studied English in Russia in a formal setting, intensive exposure to English began only upon arrival in the US for all of the participants. Residence in the US ranged from two months to four years (mean = one year).

This study was piloted with four L1-English speakers; instead of a translation task, the native speakers received the English version of the story, with the 56 target sentences being given in ungrammatical form – no articles, tense/agreement markers, etc. The participants were directed to correct the ungrammatical sentences. The native speakers consistently supplied the target article when providing the correction.

All participants were reimbursed monetarily at the end of the testing session.

### 3.2 Results and discussion

The results of the L2-learners are provided in (10).

#### (10) L2-learners' article use in target contexts (N=12)

article used	context: target article			
	definite: <i>the</i>	referential, with <i>certain: a</i>	non-referential, <i>de re: a</i>	non-referential, <i>de dicto: a</i>
<u>the</u>	75%	75%	10%	2%
<u>a</u>	19%	21%	73%	86%
<u>NULL</u>	6%	4%	17%	12%

As (10) shows, the L2-learners consistently overused *the* in referential indefinite contexts, but did not exhibit much overuse of *the* in non-referential contexts, whether *de re* or *de dicto*. This provides support for our hypothesis in (7). However, we wanted to be sure that our results were not a fluke of how L2-learners interpret the word *certain*. Thus, in our follow-up study, we tested a wider variety of referential contexts, with and without *certain*-modification.

## 4. Study 2: Elicitation

The main goal of this study was to test article use in a wider variety of referential and non-referential contexts. We also decided to use a different method (elicitation), so that we could obtain converging evidence for the results in Study 1.

<sup>4</sup> Of the four definite contexts reported here, two had the DP in object position, and two – in subject position. All of the indefinite contexts reported here had the DP in object position. We wanted to be certain that word order was not influencing the results, so in our second study, all target contexts had the DP in object position.

## 4.1 Methods

The main task of this study was an elicitation task. The participants read a series of dialogues in their L1, Russian; the last sentence of each dialogue was in English, and was missing an article. The participants' task was to fill in the missing article, paying careful attention to the preceding context. There were 52 dialogues, corresponding to 14 different context types. We discuss nine of the context types here. Other contexts included bare plurals, generics, and the corresponding controls.

The nine relevant context types were as follows, with four items per context type. The examples are given here in English, but were in Russian on the actual test (except for the last sentence).

Five of the nine contexts discussed here involve relative clause (RC) modification: according to Fodor and Sag (1982), RC-modification biases an indefinite in favor of the referential reading.

There were two definite (previous-mention) contexts, one with RC-modification (11) and one without (12). These contexts aimed to elicit *the*, while all of the other contexts reported below were designed to elicit *a*.

- (11) A: Miranda bought two birds in the pet shop yesterday; one was healthy and one was a little bit sick.  
 B: What did she do when she brought the birds home?  
 A: She gave some seeds to \_\_\_ bird that was sick.
- (12) A: I know that Betsy went to the bookstore yesterday and bought a novel and a magazine. Do you happen to know which one she read first?  
 B: She read \_\_\_ magazine first.

Three contexts were set up to give the indefinite wide scope over an intensional verb or modal. One of these contexts involved RC-modification (13) and one did not (14). The presence of wide scope and/or RC-modification biased both contexts in favor of a referential reading. In (13) and (14) the speaker clearly has a particular doctor and a particular girl in mind, respectively. The third wide-scope (referential) context involved the use of *certain* as well as RC-modification (15).

- (13) A: I heard that Mary was sick. Has she found medical help?  
 B: Yes, she has.  
 B: She is going to see \_\_\_ doctor who went to medical school at Harvard and now lives in Brookline.
- (14) In an airport, in a crowd of people who are meeting arriving passengers  
 A: Excuse me, do you work here?  
 B: Yes.  
 A: In that case, perhaps you could help me.  
 A: I am trying to find \_\_\_ girl with long red hair.
- (15) A: Nancy went to the museum yesterday. She didn't look around at all, but went directly to the room with 18<sup>th</sup> century Dutch art.  
 B: Why?  
 A: Because she wanted to see \_\_\_ certain painting that she had heard a lot about.

Two contexts involved no scope interactions – no intensional verbs, modals, etc. One of these contexts had RC-modification (16) and one did not (17). The RC-modification in (16) biases the DP in favor of a referential reading. On the other hand, the unmodified DP in (17) is more likely to be non-referential (but *de re*).

- (16) A: Alice just came to visit her nephew Andy.  
 B: Did she bring him anything?

A: Yes, she brought him \_\_\_\_ picture which shows some children playing games in their garden.

- (17) A: John looked very happy today. Do you know why?  
B: He got \_\_\_\_ dog for his birthday yesterday.

Finally, two contexts involved *de dicto* indefinites and were thus necessarily non-referential. One involved RC-modification (18) and one did not (19). Note that the presence of RC-modification does not make the DP in (18) referential, since there is no particular lawyer under discussion.

- (18) A: Roger was in a car accident last week - he hit somebody else's car. The police claim it was his fault, but Roger says he was innocent. He doesn't want to pay the fine.  
B: So what is he going to do?  
A: He is going to find \_\_\_\_ lawyer who can give him good advice.
- (19) In a children's library  
A: I'd like to get something to read, but I don't know what myself.  
B: Well, what are some of your interests? We have books on any subject.  
A: Well, I like all sorts of mechanic things. Cars, trains, airplanes... Yes! I've decided.  
A: I'd like to get \_\_\_\_ book about airplanes.

In addition to the elicitation task, the participants completed a short written test on comprehension of relative clauses, since RC-modification was an important part of the elicitation task. Participants also completed the Michigan placement test, which assessed their overall level of English proficiency. The elicitation task and the RC-comprehension task were administered in random order, and the Michigan test was always given last.

The participants in this study were 31 adult L1-Russian learners of English. The age range was 20 to 55 (mean = 39). Length of intensive exposure to English (i.e., residence in the US) ranged from 5 months to 23 years (mean = 4 years). Age at the start of intensive exposure ranged from 14 to 53 (mean = 35)<sup>5</sup>.

This study was piloted with four L1-English speakers, to whom the entire test was administered in English. The native speakers supplied the target article in all of the contexts discussed above. All participants were reimbursed monetarily at the end of the testing session.

## 4.2 Results

Of the 31 L2-learners participating in this study, 27 passed the RC-comprehension task. We report results for these 27 learners. Their proficiency, as measured by the Michigan test, was as follows: 1 beginner, 10 intermediate, and 16 advanced<sup>6</sup>.

The results for these learners are given in (20). The second column of the table gives the context code for the category in question, from (8). The four referential indefinite contexts are given in bold, and the four non-referential indefinite contexts – in italics. The number of the example illustrating each category is given in parentheses after the category name.

<sup>5</sup> Only one participant was 14 at the time of arrival in the US; the others were 17 or older.

<sup>6</sup> One participant who placed as “advanced” was actually taking the Michigan test for the second time; he had taken it a year previously as part of a completely unrelated study. That time, he had placed as “intermediate.”

(20) Elicitation task results: % article use by context (N=27).

CATEGORY	TARGET ARTICLE	TYPE (from (8))	%the	%a	%missing
<i>narrow scope (19)</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>D</i>	12.04%	84.26%	3.70%
<i>narrow scope, RC (18)</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>D</i>	12.96%	82.41%	4.63%
<i>no scope (17)</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>C</i>	18.52%	76.85%	4.63%
<b>no scope, RC (16)</b>	<b>a</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>52.78%</b>	<b>44.44%</b>	<b>2.78%</b>
<b>wide scope (14)</b>	<b>a</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>44.44%</b>	<b>52.78%</b>	<b>2.78%</b>
<b>wide scope, RC (13)</b>	<b>a</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>62.96%</b>	<b>35.19%</b>	<b>1.85%</b>
<b>wide scope, certain (15)</b>	<b>a</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>54.63%</b>	<b>34.26%</b>	<b>11.11%</b>
definite (12)	the	A	83.33%	12.96%	3.70%
definite, RC (11)	the	A	86.11%	11.11%	2.78%

The L2-learners overused *the* quite frequently in referential indefinite contexts involving wide scope and/or RC-modification. T-tests (paired two-sample for means) showed that overuse of *the* was significantly higher in each referential indefinite context than in each non-referential indefinite context ( $p < .01$ ). On the other hand, differences in *the* overuse between any two non-referential contexts or any two referential contexts were not significant, with one exception – overuse of *the* was significantly higher ( $p < .01$ ) in the context with both wide scope and RC-modification (13) than in the context with wide scope only (14). Finally, use of *the* in each indefinite category was significantly lower than (appropriate) use of *the* in each definite category ( $p < .01$ ).

It is clear from (20) that the L2-learners optionally used either *the* or *a* in the four referential indefinite contexts. Most of the learners exhibited this optionality – i.e., it was not the case that some learners used exclusively *the* in these contexts and some used exclusively *a*. Rather, most of the learners used the two articles interchangeably.

Finally, overall proficiency (as measured by the Michigan test) had little effect on article usage. While advanced learners were more accurate in their article use than beginner/intermediate learners, the error pattern of *the* overuse persisted for the advanced group. Correlations between the Michigan test score and appropriate article use were not significant for any category, with the exception of the category exemplified by (19), where there was a significant correlation of .5 ( $p < .01$ ).

### 4.3 Discussion

Let us now compare our results to the predictions made by different models of article classification. The table from (8) is repeated in (21), with the results of this study incorporated.

(21) Predictions for article use in L2-English and actual results

context	semantic property			article used in L1-English	article that L2-learners will use if...		article most often used by L2-learners in this study
	definiteness	referentiality	<i>de re</i> reading		they associate <i>the</i> with referentiality	they associate <i>the</i> with the <i>de re</i> reading	
A	+	+	+	the	the	the	the
B	-	+	+	a	the	the	the / a
C	-	-	+	a	a	the	a
D	-	-	-	a	a	a	a

As (21) makes clear, L2-learners do not associate *the* with the *de re* reading: they use primarily *a* with non-referential *de re* indefinites (context C) as well as with *de dicto* indefinites (context D). Thus, the *de re* / *de dicto* distinction does not appear to play a role in L2-English article choice, contrary to previous literature.



On the other hand, the L2-learners did have a tendency to overuse *the* with referential indefinites (context B); results from this study, as well as from our first study, support our hypothesis that L2-learners associate *the* with referentiality.

However, there still remains the question of why L2-learners optionally allow either *the* or *a* in referential indefinite contexts, while using almost exclusively *the* in definite contexts (context A). If L2-learners obligatorily associate *the* with referentiality, we would expect them to always overuse it in referential indefinite contexts; however, this is not the case. We propose the following explanation for this effect (thanks to Hagit Borer, p.c., for suggesting this line of reasoning to us).

Definiteness and referentiality are two possible ways of dividing up the article spectrum. English divides articles on the basis of definiteness, while Samoan divides articles based on referentiality (see Lyons 1999). Thus, definiteness and referentiality can be thought of as two possible settings of a parameter governing article choice<sup>7</sup>. These settings “carve up” the article spectrum in different locations, as shown in (22). Areas with the same shading correspond to a single article; the line between two shaded regions corresponds to the location of the morphological distinction<sup>8</sup>.

(22) Article use crosslinguistically: possible UG options

<i>DP type</i>	Distinction by referentiality (e.g., Samoan)	Distinction by definiteness (e.g., English)
Non-referential indefinites		
Referential indefinites		
Definites		

Now, L2-English learners are faced with the task of deciding which parameter setting to adopt for English – i.e., which semantic feature, referentiality or definiteness, distinguishes *the* from *a*. Suppose that L2-learners have UG-access and are sensitive to the various semantic distinctions, such as definiteness and referentiality. However, they are unable to decide which distinction governs English article choice – they cannot pick up on the relevant trigger to set the parameter which governs article choice. The learners will then fluctuate between the two parameter settings, sometimes dividing up articles based on definiteness, and sometimes – based on referentiality. Whichever option they choose, they will use the appropriate article with definites as well as with non-referential indefinites: whichever setting in (22) is adopted, definites and non-referential indefinites are shaded differently and require different articles. The learners will know that these two opposite sides of the spectrum require *the* and *a*, respectively. (Presumably, there is enough positive evidence so that they do not perform the article assignment backwards).

On the other hand, the middle area of the article spectrum – referential indefinites – presents a problem for the L2-learners. If the learners divide articles based on definiteness, they will group referential indefinites with non-referential indefinites, and use *a* with them. If they divide articles based on referentiality, they will group referential indefinites with definites, using *the*. Thus, if the learners are fluctuating between the two settings, they will use *a* and *the* interchangeably with referential indefinites – which is precisely what we found.

One way to look at this proposal is to assume, as Yang (2000) does for L1 acquisition, that in L2 acquisition the learner has many parameter values simultaneously. In L1 acquisition, the input over time drives up the weight of the correct parameter value and drives down the weight of the incorrect value. Let's assume that L2 learners have difficulty in setting the correct parameter value; i.e., they are not nearly as good as L1 learners at parameter-setting – the weights of the two parameter values do not change, despite the input. The two values of the parameter produce the same pattern of language usage for definite and non-referential indefinite contexts. On the other hand, for the “middle area”, referential

<sup>7</sup> See also Matthewson and Schaeffer (2000) for a formulation of the Article Choice Parameter as involving the settings of common ground (definiteness) and speaker beliefs (the *de re / de dicto* distinction); our proposal differs from theirs in that we introduce *referentiality* as a relevant parameter setting.

<sup>8</sup> This division assumes that definites are always referential. While this claim may be questionable given the existence of attributive (non-referential) definites, Lyons (1999:177) notes that languages like Samoan, which distinguish referential and non-referential indefinites, do not draw a similar distinction for definites.

indefinites, one value of the parameter leads to one result (*the*), while the other value leads to a different result (*a*). So, since the learner has large weights on both values, we expect optional behavior.

In addition to accounting for our data, this explanation provides a principled way of looking at L2-acquisition: we can say that L2-learners have full UG-access, being able to access all possible settings of a parameter, and being sensitive to existing semantic distinctions. However, they are impaired in actually setting the parameter, not being able to pick up on the relevant trigger in the input. An interesting question for further study is whether this view of UG access and trigger impairment can be applied to other domains of L2-acquisition. Another question which we leave open for now is why referentiality and definiteness should be the two relevant settings of the parameter and not some other semantic property, e.g., the *de re / de dicto* distinction.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, we examined data from adult L1-Russian learners of English in light of two models of article classification: the *de re / de dicto* distinction and the referentiality distinction of Fodor and Sag (1982). The data provide support for our hypothesis that referentiality plays a role in L2 article choice. We have suggested that the L2-learners fluctuate between considering definiteness and referentiality the relevant distinction for English article choice. Our data provide support for UG-access in L2-acquisition, since the learners are sensitive to semantic (UG-based) distinctions governing article use. The data also provide support for the reality of the referential/quantificational ambiguity of English indefinites posited by Fodor and Sag (1982). Interesting questions for further study are exactly what determines referentiality, and why referentiality and not another distinction is relevant for article choice in L2-acquisition.

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