A Semantics Comparison of French and English Definite Articles

Lois Wong

20 December 2021

1 Introduction

In this paper, I will be conducting a semantic comparison of the function morphemes in English and French as well as discussing some differences in the presuppositions they generate. More specifically, I will be writing about the definite articles in English and French and giving a brief analysis of how these different realizations of 'the' are incorporated into the composition of meaningful statements by considering possible variations in their predicate logic translations.

2 Grammatical Gender in French Definite Articles

One notable difference between the English and French forms of the definite and indefinite article is an extension of one of the more interesting qualities of English in that it does not possess grammatical gender. In French, nouns are either masculine or feminine, and their grammatical usage must exhibit agreement with the determiner(s) and adjective(s) that modify them. There are three forms of both the definite and indefinite article, and each form constitutes a single morpheme: *le*, *la*, and *les* correspond to the masculine, feminine, and plural forms of the definite article, and *un*, *une*, and *des* correspond to the masculine, feminine, and plural forms of the indefinite article. It would be ungrammatical to use the masculine forms with feminine nouns, (e.g. *le maison, 'the.MASC.SING house.FEM'), but while these grammatical gender distinctions are explicit in singular NPs, it is not

the case for plural NPs. Of course, it would be ungrammatical to use a singular article in plural NPs, but in plural constructions, the gender of the noun is not encoded or indicated in the definite or indefinite article. This three-way differentiation is not found in the English forms of the definite and indefinite article, and having only one surface form of each article not only simplifies the truth conditions required for the well-formedness of each statement/proposition but also diminishes the degree of specificity indicated by each utterance.

3   Translation into Predicate Logic

This added specificity denoted by the additional information encoded within each form of the French definite article should correspond to a difference in the predicate logic translations of English and French expressions. For example, the denotation of 'the nice colleague' only returns something if the set corresponding to such a statement is a singleton. Consider $\iota y.[Colleague(y) \wedge Nice(y)]$:

In the context of any arbitrary model and g, this command returns something if and only if the intersection of the sets assigned to the predicates 'Colleague' and 'Nice' consists of only one member, and otherwise returns Undefined. There are two equally valid and accurate translations of this utterance into French, but they differ in what they are able to reference. Additionally, it is important to note that the French pronunciation for both equivalents of 'the nice colleague' is identical except for that of the two articles.

Compare *le gentil collègue* 'the.MASC.SING nice.MASC colleague.MASC', and *la gentille collègue* 'the.FEM.SING nice.FEM colleague.FEM': If the intersection of the sets assigned to 'Colleague' and 'Nice' in the model contains more than one element but only one of the members in the intersection correspond to the gender indicated by the definite article, such a statement should return that member instead of Undefined. In the same way, if we modified the expression to be 'a nice colleague', it should be such that the entity returned is a member of the intersection of the two predicates that satisfies the gender indicated by the indefinite article. If this is the case, there would have to be some way that this additional information is encoded in the French predicate logic translation to account for the information carried by *le* and *la*. A possible solution would be translating *le gentil collègue* as $\iota y.[Masculine(y) \wedge Colleague(y) \wedge Nice(y)]$.

4 Plurality in French Definite Articles

If we were to add the gender encoded within French articles to the predicate logic translation, it would follow that the plurality indicated by *les* could also be reflected in the predicate logic. This would further complicate the mechanisms of the French definite article, and doing so would further deepen the dichotomy between English and French articles. It is also particularly noteworthy that adding plurality to the translation would make it such that while the English definite article's presupposition of uniqueness is reflected in *le* and *la*, it would not extend to *les*.

5 Differences in the Presuppositions Generated

While the presupposition of existence generated by English's *the* is readily applicable in analysing the French plural definite article (viz. *nourrir les chats noirs* 'feed the.PL cat.PL black.PL' presupposes the existence of black cats), this is not the case for the presupposition of uniqueness. The set denoted by *les chats noirs* 'the.PL cat.PL black.PL' is a grammatical expression but can be mapped to a set containing more than one member. This same phenomenon is found in English in that *the black cats* is a well-formed statement that is mapped to a set containing multiple members and not a unique cat. This attests to a difference for the *the*s in the expressions *the black cats* and *the black cat*. Perhaps the distinction between *le* and *la* vs *les* is merely an overt realization of the same distinction between the two readings of the definite article.

If we were to analyse the plural form of the definite article as distinct from the singular form(s) of the article, it could be worthwhile to consult another usage of *le* and *la* in French, an instance of which is found in denoting possession. Interestingly, there is a certain uniqueness presupposed in the utterance *la maison des femmes* 'the.FEM.SING house.FEM of+the.PL woman.FEM.PL'. (Note: *des* is a portmanteau morpheme of *de* 'of' + *les* 'the.PL') The same effect is demonstrated in the English counterpart *the women's house*, and in this example, it seems as though the uniqueness attributed to one specific group of women plays some part in the denotation of the unique house. It remains unclear, however, whether the *the* in such a statement is significantly different from the *the* in *la maison de la femme* 'the.FEM.SING house.FEM of the.FEM.SING woman.SING', or the English counterpart *the woman's house*.