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Determiners

Determiners are grammatical elements that characterize nouns and modify them or make them refer to specific objects or actions. Take, for example, this sentence in English: "This problem is complex." *This* is a determiner that goes with *problem*. Together, they form a noun phrase. *This* indicates that *problem* refers to some problem that was previously raised or mentioned in the discourse. This entry presents the different types of determiners and explains how they are acquired by children and the kinds of difficulties children with language impairment have with determiners. This is not an exhaustive description of determiners; rather, the focus is on the most frequent determiners found in language acquisition.

Determiners, by definition, are always attached to a noun; a determiner used in isolation is not a determiner but a pronoun (see the entry "Nouns and Pronouns"). For example, in "This is complex," *this* is a pronoun that can refer to many things and not necessarily to nouns. Determiners differ from pronouns in many languages. This is the case in English for some determiners. For example, *your* in "your book" is a determiner, and *yours* in "this is yours" is a pronoun.

The difference between categories makes for a more transparent grammar, but in native use, the ambiguity is not problematic, because determiners are automatically integrated with the noun when listening to or producing language. In English, determiners always appear before the noun they determine. In other languages, they can appear after the word. In yet other languages, they are tightly integrated in the nouns as prefixes or suffixes and not separate words as in English.

In English, determiners come in different subtypes:

- Articles (*the, a, an*)
- Demonstratives (*this, that*, . . .)
- Possessives (*my, your*, . . .)
- Quantifiers (*some, much*, . . .)
- Numbers (*one, two*, . . .)
- Interrogatives (*which, whose*)

Articles

Articles are the most frequent type of determiners in English, but they are not present in every language. In English, they are used to refer to something specific or particular (definite article: *the*) and to refer to something nonspecific or particular (indefinite articles: *a* and *an*). Most of the time, they are used for countable things only and not for uncountable material, for which no determiners are used. However, exceptions exist in idiomatic expressions.

In many languages, the definite article comes from the diachronic transformation of a demonstrative determiner (see later in this entry), and the indefinite article comes from a transformation of the numeral *one*. These transformations did not occur in all languages, which explains why, in many languages of the world (e.g., Russian), there are no articles at all, although demonstratives and numbers can be used instead of articles whenever necessary.

Demonstratives

Demonstratives are words used to determine what the nouns are referring to. For example, "this problem" in the example at the beginning of the entry refers to a problem that was just talked about in the discourse. This is called *deictic reference*, which can indicate space, time, or situation in the real world or refer to "location" or time within a discourse. The distance referred to can have two values, such as the English *this* and *that*,

which correspond to proximal and distal reference. Some languages use three values—proximal, medial, and distal—such as the Spanish *esse* ("this"), *este* ("that"), *aquel* ("far").

Possessives

Possessives are words that indicate the person or people to whom an object, a quality, or a property belongs. Possessives can take all the "persons" found in verbs and personal pronouns: first-person singular or plural (the speaker[s]), second-person singular or plural (the person or persons to whom the speaker is talking), and third-person singular or plural (to refer to anything but the speaker and the interaction partner). For example in English, the singular possessives are *my* (first person), *your* (second person), and *his, her,* and *its* (third person).

Development of Determiner Forms and Disorders With the Use of Determiners

In languages that have articles, such as Italian, French, or English, articles are by far the most frequent determiners. This explains why they are produced very early by young children. English-speaking children use articles at the onset of the multiword stage, between 18 and 24 months of age. At the age of 36 months, children supply nearly 90% of determiners in obligatory contexts. This also explains why articles are not the most problematic category for children with language impairment.

However, there are differences between languages with a similar high-frequency use of determiners. For example, Italian- and French-speaking young children produce articles systematically at an earlier age than do English-speaking children. The difference between these languages can be explained by differences in phonology, as proposed by Laurence Leonard's "surface" account in his book *Children With Specific Language Impairment*. In Italian and French, the salience of the syllables that make the articles is high, so the articles are easy to reproduce. As suggested in the Surface model, the reproduction of an article is not costly, so they are produced easily. This is true for normally developing children as well as for children with specific language impairment.

Possessives, demonstratives especially, appear much later than articles in language development. For example, in French, whereas the article is produced by the age of 2 years, the first use of the possessive does not occur until two years and six months of age. The number of possessives produced by children is more than 10 times smaller than the number of articles produced. Demonstratives are even more infrequent; they are 10 times more infrequent than possessives and do not appear before three years and six months of age.

See also Adjectives and Adverbs; Grammatical Development; Language Disorders in Children; Morphology; Nouns and Pronouns; Syntactic Disorders; Syntax and Grammar

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Further Readings

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