

On the proper measure of semantic nihilism in the treatment of the articles

Andrzej Bogusławski

The author supports the claim to the effect that what is commonly identified as the definite article may in fact be inseparable from some other parts of a noun phrase and have no content of its own. On the other hand, he argues against depriving it of such content in all its occurrences. In particular, he examines S. Karolak's thesis of purely formal, context-bound regulation of article occurrences (with the definite article allegedly being imposed, in an automatic way, by the "completeness" of the relevant propositional content, and the indefinite article, by its "incompleteness"). He tries to prove that, apart from cases where the definite article is a material part of the formator of a definite description, it carries the meaning of the self-contained definite description 'who or what I am thinking of' which it is necessary to ascribe exclusively to the article. On the negative side, he attempts to show that Karolak's considerations, far from proving the wholesale emptiness of the articles, lead to rules of usage whose substance is tautologous.

It has long been noticed that forms such as English *the* can sometimes be assigned no separate meaning. For instance, *the Sudan* or *the Thames* as WHOLEs are proper names where the syllable /ðə/ or the graphic word *the* are merely material parts of the respective names, on a par with their other phonological or graphic parts, such as *-dan* in *the Sudan*: there is simply no relevant word *Sudan* or *Thames* in English.¹

Karolak (1989) claims that the counterparts of the English *the* and *a* (*an*) in French ALWAYS crop up automatically as soon as what is to be encoded in a noun phrase has a certain feature which is not a separable element of the respective set of denotative properties of the expression that is being formed; and he extends the thesis to other languages as well (cf., e.g., Karolak 1984-1985, 1987a, 1987b). Apart from rare cases like the abovementioned proper names, the definite article marks, in his opinion, what he calls "completeness", and the indefinite article, "incompleteness",

¹ What I am drawing upon here, and partially also in section 1., is the analysis presented by Sørensen (1958), who pointed, among other things, to the examples just adduced.

of the content of the proposition underlying a given phrase. He explicitly rejects either the possible component of "familiarity/non-familiarity with what is denoted" or the possible component of "uniqueness/non-uniqueness of the object denoted" as the candidates for the independent conceptual counterparts of the articles that are somehow added to the other conceptual elements of a noun phrase.

It will be my intention in this article, on the one hand, to support Karolak's important observation that what is commonly identified as the definite article *MAY* in fact be inseparable from some other components of the semantics of the noun phrase and have no content of its own, and on the other, to argue against depriving it of such content in ALL its occurrences. In doing so, I shall revert to my consideration of the definite (and the indefinite) article I presented some time ago: I see no sufficient reason for abandoning the claims I then made. This applies also to the indefinite article which I think normally has a specific meaning ascribable exclusively to it; but I shall concentrate on the definite article.

1. I shall first take up the cases where the definite article is not a self-contained exponent of a separate meaning.

A paramount example here is a noun phrase with a relative clause, cf., e.g.:

- (1) Le roi qui est venu à Paris hier est mort.
(the king who came to Paris yesterday has died)

The noun phrase in (1) presents an intersection of two concepts: 'roi' and 'est venu à Paris hier'; moreover, it implies unambiguously that this intersection applies to exactly one person, as can be shown by a clear contradiction that we obtain by conjoining (1) with something like

- (2) Et un autre roi qui est venu à Paris hier n'est pas mort
(and another king who came to Paris yesterday has not died)

or by the inappropriateness of the question following (1) that would read:

- (3) Quel roi qui est venu à Paris hier est mort?
(which king who came to Paris yesterday has died?)

Should *le* by itself restrict the applicability of *roi qui est venu à Paris hier*, the latter expression supposedly having a non-unique denotation, *le* would have to express a further concept whose intersection with 'roi' in conjunction with 'est venu à Paris hier' would yield a unique denotation. In such a case (1) would be a viable answer to question (3). But it is not.

And of course it is unfeasible to figure out what specific concept could possibly play the part of the indicated restriction while being paired precisely with *le*. One could contemplate something like 'I know which (king who

came to Paris yesterday) or 'you know which (king who came to Paris yesterday) or 'you know which (king who came to Paris yesterday) I am talking about' or 'I am just thinking of a (king who came to Paris yesterday)'. But all such putative additional components are inadequate. First, the implication inherent in some of them to the effect that there are other kings who came to Paris yesterday is unacceptable. Second, the utterer of (1) may have no idea of the identity of the person in question, apart from the very notion of his coming to Paris yesterday (in addition to his being a king), something that occurs to the utterer on the basis, e.g., of what he has heard, or as a product of some inference from data having nothing to do with, say, direct acquaintance with the person.

If we now try to look at *le roi qui est venu à Paris hier* as consisting of, first, *le roi* considered identical with *le roi* in

- (4) Le roi est mort
(the king has died)

where *le roi* refers, say, to the king of Ruritania, and second, *qui est venu à Paris hier*, we must view the latter phrase as a non-restrictive relative clause; but this would require a radical change in (1): *qui est venu à Paris hier* would have to follow a caesura and display a different intonation. Thus, the noun phrase in (1) as it stands is not a concatenation of *le roi* such as in (4) and *qui est venu à Paris hier*.

As a result, the only way of doing justice to the real nature of (1) is by accepting the existence of a discontinuous expression '*le... qui...*' as applying simultaneously to two items, one noun and one verbal phrase, which expound the relevant concepts taken to intersect and to be instantiated, in the given conjunction, by exactly one person.

How is the semantic impact of '*le... qui...*' as illustrated with (1) to be defined?

The predicate *est mort* in (1) is ascribed to an argument. This argument is picked out, for the hearer, by a further ascription of two conjoined predicative concepts which we can symbolize, for (1), with $R(x)$ and $V(x)$ and an additional claim saying that " $R(x) \wedge V(x)$ " is such that ' $R(x) \wedge V(x) \wedge f(x)$ ' is such that a person characterized by ' $R(x) \wedge V(x) \wedge f(x)$ ' does not exist" where $x' \neq x$, f is a predicative variable standing for any (conjunction of) concept(s) other than R and V , and f is a predicative variable standing for the negation of that concept (conjunction of concepts). The expression '*le... qui...*' conveys the content just described minus R and V . Apart from conjunction, the content amounts to the negative-existential claim which we have formulated; it is to such a claim that the famous "uniqueness condition" imposed on definite descriptions can be reduced.

Notice that, in accordance with Karolak's argument against inscribing a positive existential claim in a definite description (cf. Karolak 1989: 23-24), no such claim has been posited for the noun phrase in (1). It is true that

one can infer from (1) that there exists exactly one king who came to Paris yesterday, but this is due to the particular assertive force of the whole of (1) which thereby participates in the entailment:

(5) (1) \Leftrightarrow it is true that (1)

and to the fact that "the truth of (1)", because of the very nature of the concept of existence and its relation to the concept of truth, entails the existence of the (only) king who came to Paris yesterday.

The definite descriptions with relative clauses do not exhaust the category of phrases expressing uniqueness of an object (in the sense just explained). There are further combinations of the definite article with other elements which are, as wholes, vehicles of the uniqueness claim imposed on a conceptual structure. One such combination in French consists of *le/la* and the preposition *d(e)* (as functioning in certain expressions). We can illustrate it with the phrase considered by Karolak (1989: 47): *la capitale d'un pays européen* ("the capital of a European country").

Karolak says that this phrase does not express uniqueness of the object in question since it is obvious that more than one town can be adequately described as *la capitale d'un pays européen*. This, however, misses the point. There are, of course, various European countries with their respective capitals (each country having exactly one capital), but the phrase *la capitale d'un pays européen* relativizes the concept of 'town governing a country' to one selected country and makes the uniqueness claim concerning a town in its relation to that country. The proper representation of the content of *la capitale d'un pays européen* is as follows: the phrase, first, applies to an object *a* the conjunction ' $T(x) \wedge G(x, y)$ ' where T stands for 'town', and G , for the relation of 'governing European country y '; second, it expresses the claim to the effect that " $T(x) \wedge G(x, y)$ " is such that ' $T(x) \wedge G(x, y) \wedge f(x)$ ' is such that an object characterized by ' $T(x') \wedge G(x', y) \wedge f(x')$ ' does not exist" where x, x', f, f' are understood in the way indicated earlier.

We may oppose this to the content of the phrase *capitale européenne* which can be represented as follows: ' $T(x) \wedge x$ ' is such that $\exists y EC(y) \wedge G(x, y)$ ' where EC stands for 'European country'. That kind of content can of course apply to many towns ($x, x', x'' \dots$) and the possible uniqueness claim as valid for a selected town must be based on a broader conjunction of features; one such additional feature can be expressed by *la* in *la capitale européenne* as opposed to its absence in *une (une capitale européenne)* which, in its turn, suggests the existence of more than one town describable in terms of ' $T(x) \wedge x$ ' is such that $\exists y EC(y) \wedge G(x, y)$ '.

Thus, *la* in *la capitale européenne* freely combines, as an alternative to *une*, with *capitale européenne*. But *la* in *la capitale d'un pays européen* is not free in that way: here, the concept 'capitale' combines with the concept 'un pays européen' by means of the discontinuous whole '*la... d'...*' which expresses both the relation of 'governing' between the respective town and

the respective country and the uniqueness of such a town in that relation, regardless of any further features of that town (the uniqueness of the town IN THAT RELATION is the only feature identifying the town).

As a result, I disagree with Karolak that forms like *le/la* in phrases containing them never have anything to do with the idea of uniqueness.

Still, for many cases, his semantic nihilism with regard to the definite article deserves full support in the following sense: whatever is expressed in phrases of the types just considered, apart from the content of the occasional nouns, adjectives, verbs, etc., occurring in those phrases, is not expressed by *le/la* (and similar shapes) alone, but by broader combinations of phonological or graphic features.

2. But Karolak's semantically nihilistic approach to the definite article is much more sweeping: he refuses to accord to it any content in ALL kinds of use.

Quite naturally, he does perceive his claim as (in his opinion, only spuriously) clashing with numerous occurrences of the definite article where a given sentence is easily contrasted in what it conveys with another sentence differing from the former one exclusively by having something else than the definite article at the same place and where the semantic correlate of the difference in the former sentence can only be paired with the definite article, while any pairing of it with anything else, including some broader combination of features, is simply out of the question. Consider, for example, the following two exchanges:

(6) I am looking for a dog.
I have just seen the dog.

(7) I am looking for a dog.
I have just seen a dog.

How does Karolak dismiss the apparent trouble that cases of this sort bring about for the claim of the all-pervading emptiness of the definite article?

He maintains that the definite article in such cases is still an automatic appendix to something else, an appendix marking "completeness" of the combination of that item with the noun (phrase) concomitant to the article, and that only the whole expresses the correspondingly richer content, richer to the point of being "complete" and as a result being crowned with the definite article. As for the obvious question: "WHAT is that 'something else'?", his answer reads: it is what is inherent in the context, however broad (cf., e.g., Karolak 1989: 46).

As many hints in Karolak's works show, he conceives of the whole transmitted by the context together with the noun and its possible modifiers as normally amounting to a definite description, at least for the phrases

in the singular with a specific reading. Thus, he explicitly elaborates on the following example:

- (8) Fred m'a parlé d'un livre et d'un film intéressants. J'ai lu le livre dont je connaissais déjà l'auteur.
(F. told me of an interesting book and film. I read the book, whose author I knew already)

(quoted after M. Wilmet who has taken it over from J. Hawkins; cf. Karolak 1989: 59); he says that the phrase *le livre* represents the sense 'le livre intéressant dont Fred m'a parlé', and the phrase *l'auteur*, the sense 'l'auteur du livre intéressant dont Fred m'a parlé'. Karolak's interpretation is richer than what is actually necessitated by (8): for example, 'le livre intéressant dont Fred m'a parlé' entails that Fred has talked to the speaker about exactly one interesting book (at least at some particular moment), whereas (8) in no way forejudges this.² But what is important for our present discussion is the very idea of definite descriptions as what Karolak has in mind, at any rate, with respect to a very large proportion of the occurrences concerned, when he talks about the outcome of the cooperation of the nouns with the context.

Notice that Karolak does not say something one might happen to think of: namely, that the definite article in cases like (6) and (8) stands for as many definite descriptions as speakers could formulate for the objects of their concern. For example, *the (dog) in (6)* might be thought of as correlated with something like *the (dog) that you have said you are looking for*, but also, in another context, where the second interlocutor is known to the first one to have been constantly preoccupied with looking for his own dog, different from the object of the first interlocutor's interest, which he has lost before some time, with something like *the (dog) that you know I am looking for*, etc. Karolak is far from advocating this kind of solution. This restraint on his part is most valuable. The acceptance of boundless polysemy (as just illustrated), of ascribing a new "meaning" to an expression on any occasion of its use, would contravene sound linguistic methodology: the absolutely indispensable idea of invariance, or of strict identity, of linguistic items in various occurrences, and thus of "social transmissibility" of knowledge or information³ as what constitutes the essence of language, would get lost.

However, there are further tenets of general linguistic theory that must

² We find a similar interpretation of the phrase *the girl* in the text:

(i) Yesterday Anderson kissed a girl. The girl was very nice.

in Sørensen (1959: 11, 16) who equates the phrase with the phrase *the girl Anderson kissed yesterday*. I have criticized this interpretation in Boguslawski (1977: 122). Both Sørensen's and Karolak's equations are inadequate for the same reason.

³ The idea has been emphasized, in particular, by Harris (1968: 6-7) who introduced the phrase "social transmissibility".

be observed in our analysis. I shall mention two of them (as interconnected items): first, a LINGUISTIC description pursues, foremostly, the goal of showing the systematic conventional (based on "une langue") definite pairings of external (sets of) perceptible features and definite functions, in particular, cognitive meanings; second, it must show the functions as something intersubjective, i.e. objectively accessible to the hearer. We could say that language is intrinsically hearer-bound and is to be described as such by the linguist *qua* linguist.

We may now ask: what pairings of his "complete content" (marked, for its "completeness", by the definite article) with perceptible means would Karolak provide for with regard to the kind of cases we are now considering?

The obvious answer is: the "complete content" in a contextually determined use of a noun phrase as illustrated above has its exponent in the form of the relevant sentence expressing the appropriate proposition and, derivatively, in the form of the definite description that corresponds to it. For example, we can indicate, for (6), such propositional forms as

- (9) You have said that you are looking for some dog

or

- (10) You know that I am looking for some dog.

However, these forms only exist as POSSIBLE expressions in the heads of the interlocutors. They are not given in the text the hearer has to do with. Nor are they derivable in any conventionally fixed way from what IS immediately given in the text. For instance, the "saying" in (9) is by no means represented in the text; it is just the FACT of the first interlocutor's USING some text. Suppose now, the second interlocutor ventures, in saying *I have seen the dog*, another definite description, viz.:

- (11) the dog which you are looking for

forejudging the existence and the uniqueness of the dog being looked for by his interlocutor: it should be clear that the uniqueness of the dog is in no way textually implied by (6): the interlocutor may in fact look for more than one dog and only mention no more than one of these; and the bare existence of the dog entailed by (11) in the context of '*I have seen...*' derives exclusively from the speaker's belief that what his interlocutor has said is true.

Thus, Karolak's "complete content" is something that can only be figured out by the hearer as a product of his guesswork. It is not conveyed in the normal way by any definite linguistic shape. As should be clear from the examples above, the whole text or the sequence of utterances the hearer is confronted with is indefinitely ambiguous with respect to possible descriptions the speakers may entertain: such a text is by no means an appropriate candidate for being linguistically paired with any "complete content" of the required sort.

In this situation, there remains only one way of salvaging the claim that the definite article in phrases like those in (6) or (8) is just the tip of the iceberg of some implicit "complete content" that could in principle be intersubjectively presented to the hearer. We might, namely, say that in a phrase of this kind some true definite description (where, let it be recalled, the definite article is merely a part of a formative including also something like *who*, *which*, *that*, *where*, etc.) gets truncated leaving as its only "trace" the "completeness marker" in the form of the definite article. In other words, *the* in *the dog* of (6) would have the same status as *'the... which'* without any verbal phrase that we would normally expect to occur next to *which*.

However, this solution is unacceptable since it falsely predicts that, say,

(12) I have just seen the dog.

from (6) has a status similar to that of an utterance like

(13) I have just seen the dog which.

Meanwhile, (13) is blatantly ungrammatical, whereas (12) is grammatically incorrigible. Moreover, phrases where the definite article joins a bare noun (possibly, with an adjectival modifier) exhibit full regularity; they are even far more frequent than phrases with relative clauses or prepositional complements.

Now, regular occurrences of a separable expression are normally due to the fact that the expression has its own cognitive meaning and that conveying that very meaning is appropriate and useful in the corresponding situations where the expression occurs. So it just stands to reason to consider the possibility of the definite article having such a meaning in the domain of usage we have been examining.

This meaning may be an indefinable item (an "atomic" meaning) or it may be a composition of more elementary senses. My investigation of the English definite article in Bogusławski (1982) has led me to the conclusion that it does convey, in the cases where it is in fact a separate expression, a conceptual composition. I have spelled it out as the following "paralocution": 'what I am thinking of'. This semantic structure is a self-contained definite description implying the uniqueness of the object. As for the concomitant noun (noun phrase), it either adds an appositional categorization of the object or represents (embodies) the object itself, as is the case with abstract items such as concepts that are being spoken about, i.e. assigned some properties in the respective sentences.

In my study, I have presented a detailed argumentation in favour of the semantic hypothesis just formulated which is I think applicable not only to English, but to the definite articles in other languages as well. One of the crucial points about the hypothesis is that it envisages no ambiguity of the definite article in the domain circumscribed above: the formula

appears even in the analysis of generic sentences, although generic sentences do require a more involved representation as regards the respective nominal concept and its relation to the content of the article; my proposal for the analysis of generic uses has been presented in Bogusławski (1990).

Here, I shall not repeat the exposition of my views, considerations and arguments concerning the articles. I shall confine myself to emphasizing some points in the picture emerging from my analysis.

It is true that the content 'what I am thinking of' is extremely poor in terms of its capacity of identifying objects for the hearer, the capacity derivable from the concepts involved alone. This stands in a certain contrast to the real situation of almost permanent success of the speakers who use the definite article in achieving mutual understanding with their hearers. How can this success be explained?

Clearly, what is at work here is a pragmatic factor. Owing to multifarious external circumstances, the hearer CAN know what the speaker is thinking of in saying what he is saying. In other words, the hearer can utilize a definite description satisfying his own identification needs, whether the same definite description as the speaker or a different one, that matches both the definite description 'what the speaker is thinking of' and a more informative definite description 'what the speaker applies or could apply to his object of interest. The foremost pragmatic strategy which makes this possible is the hearer's expectation that the speaker would observe the maxim of relevance of his utterances and the speaker's complying, as a rule, with that expectation which he assumes from the very start as given.

To illustrate this, we may point to our previous example (6). Here, the default interpretation of *the dog* will be 'the dog you have just said you are looking for': such an interpretation satisfies the relevance requirements in a straightforward way because the second interlocutor's utterance aims at saying something about the same purported object as the one which the first interlocutor has in mind and something at that which may be of interest to him as is shown by his utterance. But such an option on the second interlocutor's part is by no means mandatory. He can pursue his 'idée fixe', as exemplified by the other interpretation we have considered earlier, and still use the same noun phrase. If the first interlocutor is equipped with appropriate knowledge of his partner, he is apt, also in this situation, to succeed in deciphering his partner's utterance without getting trapped in a misunderstanding, in spite of the very meagre purely linguistic clue he is offered (in the form of 'what the speaker is thinking of' plus the categorization of the object as 'dog').

A most important circumstance which justifies our account of the meaning of the definite article in its independent uses is the fact that the relevant texts may only give the hearer the bare idea of the only object the speaker currently has in mind, to the exclusion of ANY other definite description of it as obtained by the hearer. In Bogusławski (1982: 51)

I have adduced an example of this kind and set much store with the argument from the existence of such cases; I am still convinced that the argument is crucial for the analysis of the definite article. The example was the following utterance:

(14) Excuse me just for a moment. I have to feed the cat.

by means of which someone is addressing his guest who has no idea whether or not the host is a cat-owner, how many cats he possibly has and, of course, does not know which cat it is that is to be fed; moreover, the utterer is fully aware of his hearer's state of mind as well as of the impossibility of supplying him, in terms of (14), with any objective identification of the cat (notice that the substitution of *this cat*, *that cat* or *it* for *the cat* would make (14) deviant since THESE expressions do take the hearer's relevant knowledge for granted).

Now, to return to Karolak's idea of the implicit "complete content", we must admit that the speaker who uses a phrase like *the cat* in the way illustrated by our example necessarily possesses a certain definite description of the object over and above the description 'what I have in mind' or 'what I am thinking of': the very 'thinking of something or of somebody' IS tantamount to entertaining such a description. But there is no way the 'hearer' of (14) can figure out what the description is or what other description is materially equivalent to it. Nonetheless, he receives a valuable clue: he is assured by the speaker, via the description 'what I am thinking of', that a more objective description exists and can be produced on demand.

At this point, it is worthwhile to call the reader's attention to a negative argument speaking in favour of our solution.

If we follow Karolak in looking at phrases like *the cat* in (14) as implicitly conveying, in cooperation with the context, some richer content, content that would deserve Karolak's appraisal "complete", and if, at the same time, we decide to observe the fundamental requirements of proper generalization and intersubjectivity, we may try to set the information attached to the definite article, at best, at the level of the following: 'the object of category N I can offer an identifying description of' (not: 'the object of category N such that its identifying description is so-and-so' where *so-and-so* would be appropriately substituted in each case; not even: 'the object of category N such that you know what its identifying description is'). This, however, would not do since the formula erroneously implies that only one object of a given category can be identified by the speaker and that precisely this identification property should govern the hearer's possible quest of the object the speaker is talking about among the objects of that category.

In order to appropriately improve on the formula, we would have to expand it in the following way: 'the object of category N such that I am thinking of it and such that I can offer an identifying description of it'. But this reformulation incorporates, after all, our initial 'what I am thinking

of'; and as for the remaining part of the new description just contemplated, it is redundant; moreover, there are arguments (see Boguslawski 1982) for assigning the article the role of the head conveying a self-contained definite description, and the noun (noun phrase), the role of an appositive (albeit obligatory) clause.

So this way or another, an analysis of the definite article in terms of our initial formula is inescapable.

3. Finally, let us have a closer look at Karolak's supposedly simple key he expects to automatically open a phrase's door for the definite vs. indefinite article. As we remember, the key is represented by the word pair "complétude - incomplétude du contenu", exchangeable for another word pair: "détermination - indétermination".

The two pairs are obviously stipulated to be equivalent. We may of course respect this decision; however, it creates a special conventional regulation which cannot pass unnoticed: either the sense of "determination" or of "completeness" or of both gets modified in the process.

Nevertheless, if, following this stipulation, we actually have to do with ONE UNITARY notion, then there is indeed a good chance that a generalization has been found which covers all the occurrences of the articles alike.

Still, this chance can only be transformed into reality if (apart from the obvious requirement of adequacy) the notion is an atomic, indefinable concept or if it consists in a non-disjunctive description made in readily understandable terms. Unfortunately, neither possibility materializes.

That "completeness of content" is NOT a simple, indefinable (yet understandable) concept is something too plain to be argued for.

As for the possible (and much hoped-for) non-disjunctiveness of the complex characterization Karolak supplies his notion with, the illusion that it is non-disjunctive is easily being dispelled as we read his explanations.

Thus, we learn, first, that "completeness" consists in SATURATION of all the argument positions of a functor with appropriate constants (cf., e.g., Karolak 1989: 41-42); second, that "completeness" may consist in NON-SATURATION of the positions provided that "le concept prédicatif devienne l'objet désigné avec tout le parcours de valeurs des variables libres" (Karolak 1989: 42; one of the pertinent examples can be found in Karolak 1989: 36: *L'église catholique condamne le divorce* = "the Catholic Church condemns divorce"); third, that "quand un concept monadique détermine de façon univoque son extension, il est traité comme une proposition complète, même si on l'emploie sans objet" (Karolak 1989: 44; as an example: *le soleil*); fourth, that "Les prédicats biunivoques et uni-multi-voques constituent des propositions sémantiquement closes déjà après la saturation de la position du deuxième argument, et la présence ou l'absence

du premier argument n'influence pas l'article extérieur... p. ex. *la découverte d'une énigme par un savant célèbre* ("the discovery of an enigma by a famous scholar") vs *la découverte d'une énigme*" (Karolak 1989: 86) and that "En revanche, la non-saturation du deuxième argument entraîne l'incomplétude sémantique de la proposition (la position multiple reste vide) et l'article indéfini devant le premier nom, p. ex. *une découverte d'un savant célèbre...*" (Karolak 1989: 86),⁴ and so on.

In fact, we end up with a LIST of incompatible features.

When we now ask what those features have in common (apart from the bare names "complétude", "incomplétude") such that the corresponding general characteristic is not shared by many further items, the only sensible answer that we can obtain is that the features under the head "complétude" occur where the definite article occurs and that the features under the head "incomplétude" occur where the indefinite article occurs.

This, however, appears to be just a roundabout way of saying the uncontroversial truth that the definite article occurs where the definite article occurs and that the indefinite article occurs where the indefinite article occurs.

Can this serve as a tool in solving the question of whether or not the articles happen (at least under certain circumstances) to have some separate meanings of their own, and if so, what the meanings are, how many of them there are, and when we come across what meanings?

Address of the Author:

University of Warsaw
Dept. of Formal Linguistics
Warszawa, ul. Browarna 8/10

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⁴ Notice that the caveat concerning the alleged asymmetry of the first and the second argument with respect to the articles has to be specifically added as a separate clause: how could it be deduced from the general notion of "completeness of content"? Incidentally, I do not think the formulations quoted here are adequate; as just one counterexample, consider the obviously correct phrase *une interprétation d'une énigme* where the position of the second argument is saturated and still the indefinite article (with its special meaning) is possible.