

2. Identity and Quantity

Summary

Most nouns denote a class of persons or objects. Most sentences refer to a particular instance of that class, by assigning the noun an identity. Since the topic of a sentence, by its nature, comprises only information which is known, the nouns in it must be identified at the time that the sentence is uttered. An identified noun is termed “definite”. Certain definite nouns denote a single individual (“individual noun”) and do not need to be identified further.

A noun may be definite because it is understood as identified in an earlier sentence, or because the sentence identifies it by connecting it to definite information. The word or expression which contains that definite information, and which is sufficient to identify a noun, is called a restrictive qualifier. Languages also permit a non-restrictive qualifier, which provides new information on the noun but has no purpose in identifying it. Languages are divided between those which place restrictive qualifiers before the noun (left-branching) and those which place them after the noun (right-branching). Right-branching languages require a means of distinguishing between a restrictive qualifier and a predicate, while left-branching languages do not.

The purpose of a comment is to supply new information and to connect it with the topic. The new information may have identities which are not known, and are termed “indefinite”. In that case, the sentence identifies the indefinite information so it is definite in a subsequent sentence. Alternatively, the new information may be already definite, in which case the sentence selects particular definite information from among a range of possible definite information, and connects it to the topic.

The identity of a definite noun is permanent. Unless it is individual, subsequent references to it have to be marked as definite in order to distinguish it from other nouns. This is done by an identity marker, a restrictive qualifier, or a rule of word order. Alternatively, an indefinite noun may be marked as indefinite and so distinguished from a definite noun.

A definite noun can be represented by a definite pronoun, and an indefinite noun by an indefinite pronoun. Pronouns may be subject to restrictive qualifiers, and in that construction are equivalent respectively to definite and indefinite nouns.

In addition to a noun, a verb or attribute may also be definite or indefinite, in the sense that it refers to a particular action or state and represents known or new information. A verb is definite when it is part of the topic, for example when the sentence is focus-topic, and otherwise is usually indefinite.

The purpose of marking a noun as indefinite is to introduce it to the narrative. A sentence which contains an indefinite noun, verb, or attribute may therefore be reformulated as an existential sentence with the indefinite word in object position.

A word whose identity can be or is ascertained, whether definite or indefinite, is termed “specific”. In addition, a word may refer to a class of persons, objects, actions, or states without identifying them further, and such a word is termed “general”. A general word which refers to a class which is precisely delimited from other classes describes a known general entity and is termed “generic”. A general word which refers to a class whose limits are not known is termed “nonspecific”. A nonspecific word may be one whose identity is not important, or one whose limits are initially not known but are established by reference to a generic word. A nonspecific word cannot be the topic of a sentence.

A specific sentence is one which does not contain a generic entity. A general sentence is one which contains at least one generic entity, and may not contain an indefinite entity. Nonspecific entities may occur in both general and specific sentences. The relation between generic and nonspecific entities in a general sentence parallels that between definite and

indefinite entities in a specific sentence, so that by this means both the topic-comment and existential structures can be realised.

Some languages do not mark a noun or verb as general; others do so by various means. Languages mostly distinguish generic from nonspecific nouns by placing them in topic position. Some languages also distinguish generic from nonspecific nouns, and/or nonspecific from indefinite nouns, by so marking them.

A quantity applied to a noun, verb, or attribute is a number which requires reference to a unit, which may be a discrete object, a proportion, or measure. A quantified entity is definite if the quantity is definite and indefinite if the quantity is indefinite. A quantity is definite if the entities which comprise it can be distinguished from other entities. A quantity is indefinite if the entities which comprise it cannot be so distinguished. A generic quantity is a totality. A nonspecific quantity is one whose value is not significant.

Terms Defined or Introduced

Identity, definite, indefinite, article, individual, restrictive qualifier, non-restrictive qualifier, left-branching, right-branching, specific, general, generic, nonspecific, quantity, unit.

Definite and Indefinite Noun

As we saw in Chapter 1., the topic of a sentence contains information which is known to the speaker and assumed by the speaker to be known to the hearer. The identities of all the elements in the topic are therefore known. The comment contains new information which the sentence is communicating. The sentence “John is reading a newspaper” contains the new information that a particular newspaper exists and that John is reading it. The sentence identifies the newspaper, so that a subsequent reference to “the newspaper” can be assumed to mean the one that John is reading. Before the sentence was uttered, the words “the newspaper” would refer to a different one.

Alternatively, if the sentence is “John is reading the newspaper”, the newspaper is already identified. The new information in the comment is that John has chosen to read the newspaper rather than anything else, such as going for a walk or reading a book. The newspaper may have been the one that was delivered or purchased that morning. Any subsequent reference to “the newspaper” could mean the one purchased that morning and which John is now reading, on the assumption that they are the same. If they are not the same, further information would be needed to distinguish them.

The great majority of nouns are of the type “newspaper” rather than the type “John”. “John” is an individual supposedly known to both speaker and hearer. If more than one “John” could be meant, then the speaker has to distinguish between them; otherwise, no further identification is needed. “Newspaper” refers to an indefinitely large class of entities; the purpose of identification is to limit the reference to a single newspaper upon which further information can be supplied.

The identity of a noun is therefore essential to its meaning in a sentence. A noun is either identified or not, and once identified its identity cannot subsequently be altered. A noun which has been identified is said to be *definite* and one not identified is said to be *indefinite*. It might be clearer to use the terms “identified” and “unidentified”, but these are the traditional terms. As we have seen, the purpose of a sentence containing an indefinite noun is, in general, to provide sufficient information to make that noun definite in a subsequent sentence. “John bought a newspaper on the news stand” can be followed by a sentence containing “the newspaper” as its identity has been established.

It should be noted that the sentence in the first paragraph could be formulated: “There is a newspaper which John bought on the news stand”. An indefinite noun can always be expressed in existential form, while a definite noun cannot: *“There is the newspaper which John bought on the news stand”.

A identification sentence such as “Birmingham is a city in England” might seem not to fit into the above analysis, since any subsequent reference would be to “Birmingham”, not to “the city in England”. However, it can be seen that it does fit in when it is understood to mean “There is a city in England; it is Birmingham.” This is discussed further in Chapter 6. (The Identification Function).

In “John is reading the newspaper”, the definite noun “the newspaper” receives its identity from an earlier sentence which has been exchanged between the speaker and hearer, in either the present dialogue or narrative or an earlier one: “John bought a newspaper”, “A newspaper was delivered”, etc. Alternatively, a noun can become definite in the present sentence, by attaching to it another noun or expression which is sufficient to identify it: “John is reading the newspaper which he bought this morning”; “John is reading today’s newspaper”. This is termed a “restrictive qualifier”, discussed below.

When a noun has been identified, it has to be marked as definite in all subsequent references so that it is clear to the hearer what is being referred to. If a noun is not identified at the time of utterance, it has to be marked as indefinite in order to distinguish it from identified nouns. There are at least six ways in which that definite or indefinite marking can be done:

- there is a definite or indefinite article;
- the noun is individual;
- the language assumes that the subject or topic is definite;
- a direct object of a verb is marked as definite or indefinite, by means other than an article;
- a restrictive qualifier links the noun to a definite entity;
- the sentence is existential, so indicating that the noun is indefinite.

Existential sentences are discussed in Chapter 1. The other methods are discussed below.

Definite and Indefinite Article

The noun can be marked with a *definite article*, as in English, French, Spanish, Italian, German, Welsh, Arabic, Malay, etc. The English definite article is “the”:

French: “Il avait le chapeau sur la tête.” “He had his hat on his head.”
[He had the hat on the head.]

Italian: “Il suo libro è sulla tavola.” “Her book is on the table.”
[The her book is on-the table].

Welsh: “Y mae’r awyren yn y cae.” “The aeroplane is in the field.”
[Is the aeroplane in the field.]

Arabic: “al-masʔalatu basīʔatun” “The question is simple.” [The-question simple.]

Malay: “Kedua perdana menteri itu bersalaam.”
“The two Prime Ministers greeted each other.”
[Two Prime Minister the greet-each-other.]

Many but not all languages with a definite article also mark an indefinite noun with an *indefinite article*. The English indefinite article is “a” or “some”. Other languages, including Turkish, Persian, and Hindi, possess an indefinite article but not a definite article; the absence of an indefinite article in these languages is usually not sufficient to mark a noun as definite:

Turkish: “Biz tramvayı görür görmez, Orhan koşmağa başladı.”
“As soon as we saw the tram, Orhan began to run.”
[We tram saw not-saw, Orhan to-run began.]

In Serbian and some other Slavonic languages which do not have an article, an adjective is marked as definite or indefinite, and in this way the noun that it qualifies is made definite or indefinite:

Serbian: “Ovo je mladi čovek o kojem sam ti pričala.”
“This is the young man about whom I spoke to you.”
[This is young _(definite) man about whom I-am to-you spoken.]
“Imate li slobodan sto?” “Do you have a free table?”
[You-have query free _(indefinite) table?]

Individual Noun

A noun of which there is assumed to be only one occurrence is definite by its nature and should not need to be marked as such. One example is the names of persons or places. The traditional term for this is a “proper noun”, but this seems unsatisfactory and we suggest that the term *individual noun* is clearer. In many languages with a definite article, it is also used to mark individual nouns:

- French: “La Reine Victoria”; “La France”; “Le docteur Ribot”.
[The Queen Victoria; the France; the Doctor Ribot.]
- Greek: “ο Αύγουστος” [The August]. “η Αγγλία” [The England].
- German: “Die kluge Else”. “Clever Else”. [The clever Else].

In Malay, a non-individual noun which refers in fact to only one individual does not need an article:

- “Perdana menteri sudah pulang.” “The Prime Minister has returned home.”
[Minister Prime has come-home.]

Definite Topic or Subject

If a language does not have a definite article, it is assumed that the subject contains only definite nouns. An indefinite entity is marked through the existential construction:

- Chinese: “Lǎoshī zǒu jìn le jiàoshì.” “The teacher came into the classroom.”
[Teacher went in (aorist) classroom.]
“Yǒu yī gè xuésheng zhànle qǐlái.” “A student stood up.”
[There-is one unit student stand (aorist) did up-come.]

- Japanese:
“Mukashi hitori no o-ji-san ga sunde imashita. O-ji-san wa totemo binbō deshita.”
“Once upon a time there lived an old man. He was very poor.”
[Once one old-man (subject) living there-was. Old-man (topic) very poor was.]

As mentioned in Chapter 1., languages which have an indefinite article may construct a sentence with an indefinite noun in subject position. Such a sentence is equivalent to an existential construction:

- “A delivery van called today, and left a parcel.”
“There was delivery van which called today; it left a parcel.”

Definite and Indefinite Object

Languages which do not have a definite article may mark the object as definite or indefinite by a case or suffix:

- Turkish: “Öküzü aldı.” “He bought the ox.” [Ox (accusative) he-bought.]
“Bir öküz aldı.” “He bought an ox.” [An ox (absolute) he-bought.]
- Persian: “ketabra be man dad” “He gave the book to me.” [Book-the to me he-gave.]
“ketabi be man dad” “He gave a book to me.” [Book-a to me he-gave.]

An object may also be marked as definite by placing it before the verb and as indefinite by placing it after the verb. The Chinese definite object is also marked with the particle “bǎ”:

- Finnish: “Kuka kirjan on pöydälle unohtanut.” “Who has left the book on the table.”
[Who book (accusative) has table-on left?]
“Kuka on unohtanut pöydälle kirjan?” “Who has left a book on the table?”
[Who has left table-on book (accusative) ?]

Chinese: “Tā bǎ shū fàng hǎo le.” “She placed the books in good order.”
[She the book put good _(aorist).]

“Wǒ qù mǎi shū.” “I am going to buy a book.” [I go buy book.]

Similarly, a period of time adverbial in Chinese is indefinite after the verb, and definite before the verb:

“Wǒ xuéguo sì gè yuè de Zhōngwén.” “I studied Chinese for four months.”
[I study _(perfective) four unit month-of Chinese.]

“Wǒ bàn nián méi qù kàn diànyǐng le.” “I have not been to see a film for the last six months.”
[I half year not go see film _(aorist).]

Alternatively, a pronoun pointer to the object is placed before the verb if it is definite, and omitted if it is indefinite:

Swahili: “Umekileta kitabu?” “Have you bought the book?” [You-have-it-buy book?]

“Umeleta kitabu?” “Have you bought a book?” [You-have-buy book?]

Hungarian has a definite article “a”/“az” and an indefinite article “egy”. In addition, each verb has one of two different forms, depending on whether its object is definite or indefinite:

“Hallgatta az operát.” “She listened _(definite) [to] the opera.”

“Hallgatott egy operát.” “She listened _(indefinite) [to] an opera.”

Inuit indicates a definite object by a pronoun pointer attached to the verb, and an indefinite object by a case suffix (“-nik” = “with”) attached to the object:

“Atuakkat atuarpai.” “He read the books.” [Books read-he-them.]

“Atuakkanik atuarpuq.” “He read some books.” [Books-with read-he.]

Restrictive Qualifier

A noun can also be marked as definite by adding sufficient further information about it to identify it. It can then be treated as definite in the narrative or dialogue. Information added to a noun is called a *qualifier*, and the noun is said to be *qualified*. An example is a simple relative clause:

“the book which I read yesterday”

“a book which I read yesterday”

“the book, which I read yesterday”

“a book, which I read yesterday”

In the first two phrases, the qualifier “which I read yesterday” identifies the book. It does that by linking the noun “book” to a pronoun (“I”) and to an adverbial (“yesterday”), both of which are definite. In the first phrase, a number of books have been identified in previous sentences and the qualifier distinguishes between them. In the second phrase, the qualifier identifies the book for the first time. In both cases, any subsequent reference to “the book” is definite. The qualifier is called a *restrictive qualifier*.

In the second two phrases, the qualifier “which I read yesterday” does not identify the book but provides further information about it. It is called a *non-restrictive qualifier*. A non-restrictive qualifier is a stylistic device which enables the speaker to string a number of sentences together. Instead of “I have returned the book. I read it yesterday”, he/she can say “I have returned the book, which I read yesterday.” The comma is represented in English speech by a brief pause.

A qualifier therefore has two purposes, to make a noun definite and to provide a further information on it. The same arises with other types of qualifier, for example an adjective:

“the red book”

“a red book”.

In these phrases, the qualifier “red” is restrictive and identifies the book if it is assumed that there are a number of books, each one with a different colour. If there is more than one book with the same colour, “red” is non-restrictive and the expression does not identify it.

We noted above (Definite and Indefinite Article) that Serbian distinguished between definite and indefinite adjectives. A definite adjective is restrictive and an indefinite adjective is non-restrictive:

“Umorni putnik se sinoć vratio kući.” “The tired traveller returned home last night.”
[Tired_(definite) traveller himself last-night returned home.]
“Umoran, putnik se sinoć vratio kući.” “Tired, the traveller returned home last night.”
[Tired_(indefinite), traveller himself last-night returned home.]

A further type of qualifier links the noun with another noun or pronoun which is definite. If that link is sufficient to identify the noun, the qualifier is restrictive. Examples are:

“the trees in our road”; “my car”; “the king of France”; “the company accounts”.

Assuming that these links are unique (for example that I have one car), and exist (that there is a king of France), these qualifiers identify their nouns and are therefore definite. The functions of different links depend on the different functions of nouns and are summarised in Chapter 12.

Finally, a demonstrative pronoun can express a physical link relative to the speaker, the hearer, or a third party, assumed to be definite:

“that mountain”; “this desk”; “those buildings”.

In languages which do not have either a definite and indefinite article, a restrictive qualifier is an essential means of identifying a noun. As the following examples show, if there is a definite article but not an indefinite one, the qualifier to the definite noun is restrictive; if there is an indefinite article but not a definite one, the qualifier to the indefinite noun is non-restrictive. If there is no article, a qualifier is usually restrictive.

In addition, a distinction exists between those languages which have a relative pronoun (such as “who”, “which”, or “that”) and those which do not. If there is no relative pronoun, a relative clause has to be distinguished from the predicate clause which contains the verb and object relating to the noun. This has an effect on word order, as it is usually achieved by placing the relative clause and other qualifiers in front of the noun, and the predicate verb and object after the noun. Such languages usually do not have a definite article, and relative clauses in them are usually restrictive.

For example, Turkish, Chinese, and Japanese do not have a definite article or (in literary Turkish) a relative pronoun. Relative clauses are restrictive, and placed in front of the noun:

Turkish: “evi büyük olan bir arkadaşım” “a friend of mine whose house is big”
[house-his big being a friend-my]
“şimdi konuşan adam” “the man who is now speaking” [now speaking man]

Chinese: “mài bàozhǐ de shāngdiàn” “a shop that sells newspapers” [sell newspaper of shop]
“nǐ yào fù de qián” “the money you will have to pay” [you must pay of money]

Japanese:

“Michiko ga iku gakkō wa Tōkyō ni arimasu.”
“The school where Michiko is going is in Tokyo.”
[Michiko_(subject) go school_(topic) Tokyo-in is.]
“Tomu ga futtobōru no kippu o ageta onna no ko”
“the girl to whom Tom gave a football ticket”
[Tom_(subject) football-of ticket_(object) gave girl].

In Chinese, relative clauses like other qualifiers are linked to the following noun by the particle “de”, here translated “of”.

German and Hindi have a relative pronoun. Relative clauses to definite nouns are placed before the noun and other relative clauses after the noun:

German:	“der am Wegrand stehende Baum” [the by-the wayside standing tree]	(restrictive)
	“ein Baum, der am Wegrand steht” [a tree, which by-the wayside stands]	(restrictive)
	“der Baum, der am Wegrand steht” [the tree, which by-the wayside stands]	(non-restrictive)
Hindi:	“jis ādmī se mai~ bāt kar rahā thā, vah kal bhārat jāegā” “The man I was talking to is going to India tomorrow.” [Which man-to I talking was, he tomorrow India is-going.]	(restrictive)
	“mai~ ek ādmī se bāt kar rahā thā jo kal bhārat jāegā” “I was talking to a man who is going to India tomorrow.” [I a man-to talking was who tomorrow India is-going.]	(non-restrictive)

These and other languages in which restrictive qualifiers precede the noun are called *left-branching* languages. In contrast, in Spanish, Italian, and other Romance languages, restrictive qualifiers follow the noun, and these are termed *right-branching* languages. Shorter non-restrictive qualifiers in right-branching languages, such as adjectives, precede the noun, while longer non-restrictive qualifiers follow it. In addition, right-branching languages have a relative pronoun to enable a relative clause to be distinguished from the predicate verb and object.

Spanish:	“Tuvo que parar para cambiar sus ruedas deterioradas.” [He had to stop to change his tyres worn.]	(restrictive)
	“Tuvo que parar para cambiar sus deterioradas ruedas.” [He had to stop to change his worn tyres.]	(non-restrictive)

The first sentence conveys that only those tyres which were worn were changed. The second sentence allows us to understand that all the tyres were changed.

	“un elefante cojo” “a lame elephant” [an elephant lame]	(restrictive)
	“el imponente Everest” “the imposing mount Everest”	(non-restrictive)
Italian:	“Ho invitato i colleghi giovani, non i colleghi anziani.” “I’ve invited my young colleagues, not my old colleagues.” [I’ve invited the colleagues young, not the colleagues old.]	(restrictive)
	“Ho sempre ammirato i tuoi affascinanti quadri.” “I’ve always admired your fascinating paintings.”	(non-restrictive)

The right-branching character of Romance languages also appears in the formation of technical expressions from two nouns linked together. The word which is first in English is a restrictive qualifier of the other word, and therefore appears second in Italian:

“dish washer”	“lavastoviglie”	[wash-dishes]
“coat hanger”	“attaccapanni”	[hang-clothes]
“record player”	“giradischi”	[turn-records]
“hair dryer”	“asciugacapelli”	[dry-hair]
“standard-bearer”	“portabandiera”	[carry-standard]

In Hungarian, adjectives and shorter restrictive qualifiers precede the noun, while relative clauses (restrictive and non-restrictive) follow the noun. Hungarian is therefore classed as left-branching:

“gyönyörű gesztenyefa”	“beautiful chestnut tree”	
“alvó kutya”	“sleeping dog”	(“alszik” = “sleep”)
“selyembe öltözött nő”	“women dressed in silk”	[silk-into dressed woman]
“mai újság”	“today’s newspaper”	[today (attribute) newspaper] (“ma” = “today”)
“a ház előtti kert”	“the garden in front of the house”	[the house in-front-of (attribute) garden]
“kalapos hölgy”	“lady with a hat”	[hat (possessing) lady] (“kalap” = “hat”)

“a könyv, amit küldtél nekem” “the book that you sent [to] me”

Arabic, Persian, and Malay are right-branching languages in which all qualifiers follow the noun. In Arabic, a qualifier to a definite noun is assumed to be restrictive and therefore definite. The qualifier takes a definite article, or, if a relative clause, the relative pronoun “allađi” (“the one which”) (or its variants):

“al-ṣaqabatu al-kaʿūdu” “the insurmountable obstacle”
[the-obstacle the-insurmountable]
“saṭḥu l-manzili” “[the] roof of the house”
“al-hujratu llatī bi-jānibi l-bābi l-raʿsiyyi”
“the room which is next to the main door”
[the-room the-one-which next-to the-door the-main]

A qualifier to an Arabic indefinite noun is assumed to be non-restrictive and therefore indefinite. The qualifier does not take an article and the relative clause does not take a relative pronoun:

“qiṣṣatun ṭawīlatun” “a long story” [story long]
“qiṣṣatun ʾabṭāluhā maʾrūfūna” “a story with well-known heroes”
[story heroes-its well-known]
“barqīyyatu tahniʾatin” “[a] telegram [of] congratulations”
“ḥaqībatun kabīratun ʾuxaṣṣiṣuhā li-naqli l-kutubi”
“a large bag which I use exclusively for carrying books”
[large bag I-use-it for-carrying the-books]

Persian and Malay/Indonesian do not have a definite article. In Persian, a definite noun qualified by a restrictive relative clause is marked by the suffix “-i”. If the definite noun is not so marked, the relative clause is non-restrictive:

Persian: “mardi ke anja bud ketabra beman dad” (definite)
“The man who was there gave me the book.”
[Man-the who there was book (object) to-me gave.]
“moʾallef ke nevisandaye xubist in sabkra exteyar karde ast” (non-restrictive)
“The author, who is a good writer, has chosen this style.”
[Author who writer good-is this style choice (object) made is.]

In Malay/Indonesian, the equivalent to “one” can be used to show that a noun and its attached relative clause are indefinite:

Malay: “Orang yang duduk dekat jendela itu bekerja dengan saya.” (definite)
“The person who is sitting near the window works with me.”
[Person who sit near window-that works with me.]
“sebuah grup vokal yang di dalamnya Rima juga ikut” (indefinite)
“a vocal group in which Rima also participates”
[one group vocal which in-it Rima also participate].

In addition to left and right-branching languages there is a third group, of which English is an example, in which restrictive qualifiers both precede and follow the noun. Such languages also have a relative pronoun. However, in English a preceding qualifier qualifies an entire nominal expression, while a following qualifier does not. The phrase “the collected books, articles, and papers of Mr Smith” indicates that his books, articles, and papers have all been collected. From the phrase “Mr Smith’s books, articles and papers which have been collected”, it is not completely clear that the books and articles have been collected, as well as the papers. This example implies that English is essentially left-branching, and it may be that all languages in fact fall into one or the other category.

The distinction between left and right-branching languages, which is defined here for restrictive qualifiers, is one of the rules of word order in a language (Chapter 4.).

Chapter 5. (Gerund) describes the grammatical device of linking together two predicate sentences, which also fulfils the purpose performed in right-branching languages by a non-restrictive qualifier.

Pronoun

Any definite or individual noun can be represented in a dialogue or narrative by a *pronoun* such as “I”, “you”, “he”, “she”, “it”, or “they”. A pronoun representing someone or something which is definite is a *definite pronoun*. If a noun can be identified by its position (physical or otherwise) relative to a definite noun, it may be represented by a demonstrative pronoun such as “this” or “that” which is also definite.

Languages also possess an *indefinite pronoun*, such as “someone” or “something” for a unit or “some” for an indefinite quantity. The purpose of an indefinite pronoun is to refer to a person or thing which has not yet been identified. A reference to that person or thing is not possible unless sufficient information is supplied to identify him, her, or it. An example is “Someone telephoned today about your complaint. I have taken his telephone number for you to return the call.”

A definite pronoun can refer either to a previously identified noun or to an entity identified by an attached definite qualifier, which can take any of the forms described previously, for example:

“what John is reading”; “the red one”; “those in our road”; “mine”.

An indefinite pronoun can also be qualified, and in that case the qualification is usually restrictive:

“someone who works here”; “something blue”; “one of our books”.

A similar construction occurs in other languages with a definite and indefinite article:

German: “Endlich fand ich, was ich suchte.” (definite)
“At last I found, what I was looking for.”
[At-last found I, what I sought.]
“Du hattest eine Vorahnung von etwas entsetzliches, was dich betreffen müsse.”
“You have a presentiment of something terrible, which must (subjunctive) affect you.”
(indefinite)

Languages which do not have a definite or indefinite article usually possess a definite and indefinite pronoun which can be qualified, or have an equivalent construction whereby a restrictive qualifier identifies a definite entity, and a non-restrictive qualifier provides information on an indefinite entity:

(right-branching languages)

Finnish: “Minkä sanoin, on totta.” “What I said, is the truth.” (definite)
“Sinulla on aina joitakin esteitä.” (indefinite)
“There is always something that prevents you.”
[At-you is always something to-prevent.]

Russian: “to, chto sluchilos’ potom, bylo neinteresno” (definite)
“What happened after that was not interesting.”
“v sadu ya uvidela chto-to tёмnoe” (indefinite)
“I saw something dark in the garden.”
[In garden I saw something dark.]

Malay: “Yang sudah dipakai tidak bisa dikembalikan.” (definite)
“The used ones can’t be returned.”
[Which have been-used not can be-returned.]
“Ada sesuatu yang kurang baik.” (indefinite)
“There’s something which isn’t good.”

(left-branching languages)

In Turkish, the definite pronoun is the suffix “-ki” (“the-one”):

	“Bu kalem benimki değil.” “This pen is not mine.” [This pen mine-the-one is-not.]	(definite)
	“Bu kalem benim değil.” “This pen is not one of mine.” [This pen mine is-not.]	(indefinite)
	“arkadaşımızinki” “the one belonging to your friend” [friend-your-of-the-one]	(definite)
	“yiyecek bir şey alalım” “let us buy something to eat” [about-to-eat one thing let-us-buy]	(indefinite)
Hindi:	“jo kahtā hū~, vah sac hai” “What I say is the truth.” [What saying I-am, that truth is.]	(definite)
	“kuch aur log āte ho~ge” “Some more people will be coming.” [Some more people coming will-be.]	(indefinite)
Chinese:	“Zhè shì wǒ zuótiān mǎi de.” “This is what I bought yesterday.” [This be I yesterday buy of.]	(definite)
	“Wǒ kàndào yíge yǒuqù de dōngxi.” “I saw something interesting.” [I notice one-unit interesting of thing.]	(indefinite)
Japanese:	“Watashi wa kyonen katta no o tsukatta.” “I used the one I bought last year.” [I _(topic) last-year bought one _(object) used.]	(definite)
	“Watashi wa kuroi no ga hoshii.” “I want a black one.” [I _(topic) black one _(subject) is-wanted.]	(indefinite)

Definite and Indefinite Verbs

Running through the above analysis is the idea that a noun or pronoun is either definite or indefinite. If definite, its identity is known either from a previous sentence, recent or remote, or from an attached qualifier, and it represents known information. If indefinite, its identity has not been established although the range of nouns to which it refers may have been restricted, and it represents unknown information. If the sentence supplies sufficient information to establish the identity of an indefinite noun, it becomes definite in a subsequent sentence.

The same concept is also true of verbs which describe an action (a *dynamic* verb). The distinction usually depends on whether the verb is part of the topic or part of the comment. The sentence “She walked down the road” can be intended to provide further information on “she”, in answer to the question “What did she do?”. “She” is the topic and the rest of the sentence is the comment. It can be rephrased as “She took a walk down the road”, in which the function of the verb is expressed by a noun. We see that the noun and therefore the verb “walk” are indefinite. After the sentence has been uttered, her walk has become definite and can be talked about: “Her walk down the road was tiring.”

Alternatively, “She walked down the road” can be intended to provide further information on “her walk”, in answer to the question “Where did she walk?” In that case, it cannot be rephrased as “She took a walk down the road”, but as “Her walk was down the road”. The topic is “she walked”, and the walk is already identified when the sentence is uttered. The noun and therefore the verb “walk” are definite. The comment is “down the road”, meaning that it was not in some other location such as “along the path” or “in the garden”.

Similarly, a verb is part of the topic and therefore definite in a focus construction. The sentence “It was at 10.30 that she walked down the road” answers the question “When did the walk take place?”. “She walked down the road” is the topic and therefore all the elements in it are definite. The comment is “at 10.30”, meaning “at 10.30 rather than at any other time”.

A further example is “She saw her friend in the distance”. This can be rephrased as: “She had sight of her friend in the distance”, in answer to the question “What happened to her?” However, the sentence “It was her friend that she saw in the distance” answers the question “Whom did she see?”. In the first sentence, “see” is indefinite, and in the second, “see” is definite.

It is possible to apply the same definite/indefinite analysis to verbs which express states (a *stative verb*), including an attributive verb. In most languages, attributes can be represented as nouns. If the noun is indefinite, the attribute is indefinite, and if it is definite, the attribute is definite. The term “attribute” includes “adjective”, for reasons explained in Chapter 6. (Attributive Sentence and Verb). The sentence “The sky is blue” means “The sky has a shade of blueness”, and “blue” is indefinite. We can subsequently talk of the definite “blueness of the sky”, in the sense that it can be distinguished from other shades of blue. “The lecture was 1½ hours long” means “The lecture had a length of 1½ hours”, where “long” is indefinite. We can subsequently refer to the definite “length of the lecture”.

Similarly, “He was very happy to see her” is equivalent to “He felt a great happiness in seeing her”; “happy” is indefinite. A subsequent sentence could refer to “the happiness that he felt”; in which “happy” is definite.

An example of a stative verb is “exist”. The sentence “Black holes exist in our galaxy” is equivalent to “Black holes have an existence in our galaxy”; “exist” is indefinite. However, the above sentence could be rephrased “It is in our galaxy that black holes exist”, in which “exist” is definite.

In Chapter 1. (Existence and Non-Existence), examples were given of an existential sentence which introduced a verbal action as a new object. By the nature of an existential sentence, the verb is indefinite. Here are two more from Italian:

“Fu sentita una esplosione.” “[There] was heard an explosion.”
“È stata dichiarata una tregua.” “[There] has been declared a truce.”

Arabic has few adverbs, and expresses the adverbial function by a verbal noun which repeats the action of the verb:

“yaşifu waşfan daqīqan” “He describes accurately.” [He-describes description accurate.]
“ibtasamat lahu btisāmatan kabīratan” “She gave him a big smile.”
[She-smiled at-him smiling big.]

Verbs which possess identity are concept words, that is verbs which express an idea in the world. Auxiliary verbs, that is verbs which only express the grammatical relation between words, do not have an identity. Examples are “is” and “has” in “Paris is the capital of France” and “We have four children”. This distinction is discussed further in Chapter 4.

Dynamic and stative verbs are discussed further in Chapter 5. (Aspect). Attributive sentences are discussed further in Chapter 6.

Specific and General Concepts

Most concept words are a single instance of a class of persons, objects, actions, or states. “The student wrote an essay” refers to a particular student among a class of entities called “student”, a particular action of writing, and a particular essay among a class of entities called “essay”. “The student drank some coffee” refers to a particular act of drinking and to some particular coffee among a class of substances called “coffee”. “Our house is 7 metres high” refers to a particular house among a class of entities called “house” and a particular height among a class of conditions called “high”. We have seen in this chapter how identify distinguishes a particular entity within a class. An entity which can be but has not yet been identified is called “indefinite”, and one which has been identified and can be subsequently referred to is called “definite”. For these examples, we may subsequently refer to “the essay the student wrote”, “the coffee that he drank”, and “the height of our house”. For the dynamic verbs, we may refer to “her writing of the essay” and “her drinking of the coffee”.

We can use the term *specific* for a noun, verb, or attribute which can be identified, whether definite or indefinite, such as “the student”, “our house”, “an essay”, “the coffee”, “the height of 7 metres”,

“wrote”, and “drank”. Specific nouns evidently include words which are definite by their nature, such as the pronouns “he”/“she”/“it”, and an individual such as “Mrs Smith” or “London”. For a substance such as coffee, a *unit* is stated or inferred. “Her coffee was sugared” means “Her cup of coffee was sugared”. “Her coffee was Kenyan” means “The type of her coffee was Kenyan”. This construction is discussed later in this chapter, under Quantity.

Languages can also make statements about a class of persons, objects, actions, or states, without identifying the members of the class. “Students write essays” refers to students as a class, a class of writings, and essays as a class, without distinguishing between the members of those classes. “Students drink coffee” refers to coffee as class. “Apples are sweeter than pears” refers to apples and pears as a class, and to a condition called “sweet” without specifying its extent. A word which refers to a class of entities in this way is called *general*. A general noun is a class of persons or objects, a general verb is a class of occurrences, and a general attribute is a class of qualities or states, whose specific members are not identified.

The sentences we have just quoted make general statements about a class of entities. They have a general subject, a general verb, and a general predicate. In addition, a sentence may make a general statement about a specific entity, and have a specific subject and a general verb. “Mr Brown drives to work on Tuesdays” means that, in general, Mr Brown drives to work on a Tuesday, without specifying his action on each specific Tuesday. “Drives” and “Tuesdays” are therefore general. “Mr Brown drove to work on Tuesday” refers to Mr Brown’s action on a particular Tuesday, and “drove” and “Tuesday” are specific.

Another example is “This news is very surprising”. This conveys that the news caused surprise, but only in general. It is possible that to some persons it did not cause surprise. “The suddenness of this news surprised my colleagues” conveys a specific effect. “Surprising” is one of a class of words called “general participle”, discussed in Chapter 5. (General Participle). Similarly, in “The house was visible from a distance”, “visible” is general; it does not convey that the house could be seen by a particular person. As these example shows, a general verb or general participle may often have no object:

“He gardens on Saturdays.” “Can you hear?”

The distinction between a specific and a general noun can often be expressed through a restrictive qualifier. “ice-cream” in “We like ice-cream” is general. In “We like the ice-cream you have just bought”, it is specific.

A sentence with a general comment may select one general class from a range of possible general classes. “Sheila dislikes garlic” may mean that Sheila dislikes garlic, but not necessarily onions; “Sheila catches the 8.12 train every day” means that Sheila catches the 8.12 train, not the 8.45.

English does not employ a consistent method to distinguish specific and general nouns. In the above examples, the plural without an article indicates generality. The same sentences could also be expressed “A student writes essays”; “An apple is sweeter than a pear”. Ambiguity is always possible: “I read the books in my library” may refer to the books in general, or all of the books, or some of the books.

Many languages with a definite article use that to indicate a general noun:

French: “La vie est courte.” “[The] Life is short.”
“J’aime les pommes et les poires.” “I like [the] apples and [the] pears.”

German: “Er liebt die Oper.” “He loves [the] opera.”
“Das Singen macht ihm Freude.” “[The] Singing gives him pleasure.”

Greek: “Δε φοβάμαι το θάνατο.” “I’m not afraid of death.” [Not I-fear the death.]
“Ζει με την ελπίδα.” “She lives in hope.” [She-lives in the hope.]

Hungarian:
“Ilyen az élet.” “Such is life.” [Such the life.]
“Szeretem a banánt.” “I like bananas.” [I-like the bananas.]

Arabic: “al-zawāju masʔūliyyatun” “Marriage is a responsibility.”
 [The-marriage responsibility.]
 “māʔidatun mina l-nuḥāsi l-maḥḥūri” “a table of engraved brass”
 [table of the-brass the-engraved]

In many languages, the principal means of distinguishing general and specific sentences is to use different forms of the verb. In English the general form is the simple present or “habitual” past:

“Mr Brown drives to work” (general). “Mr Brown is driving to work” (specific).
 “Mr Brown used to drive to work” (general). “Mr Brown drove to work” (specific).

In Spanish, “be” is expressed by “ser” if the state or identification is permanent and by “estar” if is transitory. The permanent state or identification is usually general, the impermanent one usually specific:

“El cobre es ideal para los cables.” “[The] Copper is ideal for [the] cables.” (“ser”)
 “Estaba rojo de vergüenza.” “He was red with shame.” (“estar”)

Russian employs different forms of adjective for a verbal attribute which expresses a permanent characteristic, which is general, and a temporary state which is specific:

“Reka burnaya.” “[The] river [is a] turbulent [one].” (general)
 “Segodnya reka spokoina.” “Today [the] river [is] calm.” (specific)

The specific form of the first adjective would be “burna” and the general form of the second adjective would be “spokoinaya”.

Similarly, Inuit can distinguish between a specific and a general attribute:

“Quinarpuq.” “He was amusing.” (on a specific occasion) [Amuse-he.]
 “Quinartuuvuq.” “He is amusing.” (in general) [Amusing-is-he.]

Welsh possesses different forms of the verb for the general past and specific past:

“Cerddai ef dros y mynydd yn yr haf.” “He used to walk over the mountains in summer.”
 [Walked_(general) he over the mountain in the summer.]
 “Euthum i am dro ar hyd y traeth.” “I went for a walk along the beach.”
 [Went_(specific) I for walk along the beach.]

Turkish possesses a general form of the verb, called “aorist” in grammars. Other verbal forms are usually specific. The following is reported to be a sign at traffic hazards:

“Başka memleketlerde kazara ölürlər; biz kazara yaşıyoruz.”
 “In other countries they die by accident; we live by accident.”
 [Other countries-in by-accident die-they_(general); we by-accident living-are-we_(specific)-]

The Hindi verb has two forms, a general form ending in “tā” or its variants (called “imperfective” in standard grammars), and a specific form ending in “ā” or its variants:

“mai~ bharāt me~ hindī boltā hū~” “I speak Hindi in India.”
 [I India-in Hindi speaking_(general) am.]
 “vah mujhse hindī me~ bolī~” “They spoke to me in Hindi.”
 [They to-me Hindi-in spoke_(specific)-]
 “darvāzā nau baje band hotā thā” “The door used to be closed at nine o’clock.”
 [Door nine o’clock closed was_(general)-]
 “kal darvāzā nau baje band huā thā” “Yesterday the door was closed at nine o’clock.”
 [Yesterday door nine o’clock closed was_(specific)-]

Chinese possesses a range of aspect markers for verbs, described in Chapter 5. (Aspect). In sentences with general verbs, these are absent:

“Mǎ chī cǎo.” “Horses eat grass.” (general)
“Wǒ chīle liǎng wǎn fàn.” “I have eaten two bowls of rice.” (specific)
[I eat _(aorist) two bowl rice.]

Measure words (see below, Quantity) are used in Chinese for specific nouns:

“yī zhī chuán” [one unit ship] “a ship” “chuánzhī” “ships”
“yī běn shū” [one unit book] “a book” “shūběn” “books”.

Chinese can mark a specific verb with an expression such as “yīxià” (one-time):

“Jiějie bǎ fāngjiān shōushí le yīxià.” “My elder sister tidied up her room.”
[Elder-sister the room tidied _(aorist) one-time.]

The Swahili verb possesses a general form, with the prefix “hu-”:

“Ulevi huondoa akili.” “Drunkenness takes away _(general) sense.”
“Kila mwaka baba yangu hulima shamba la mpunga.”
“Every year my father cultivates a field of rice.”
[Every year father my cultivates _(general) field of rice.]

Other languages surveyed do not possess a general form for the verb, for example French “Il se levait de bon matin” means both “He was rising early” and “He used to rise early”. Adverbials such as “toujours” (“always”) or other sentences in the narrative indicate whether the sentence is general or not.

The above examples illustrate the inconsistent terminology which is often used for the general verb construction in authoritative standard grammars. The Turkish “aorist” is used to refer to the general Turkish verb¹. “Imperfective” is used for the general verb in Hindi². In fact, “aorist” and “imperfective” are terms borrowed from aspects of the definite/indefinite verb (Chapter 5.). The Chinese example:

“Yī gè rén bù néng bù jiǎng lǐ” “A person must be reasonable”
[One unit person not able not talk reason]³

is given as an example of an indefinite topic. It should be clear from the analysis in Chapter 1. that a topic cannot be indefinite. In this example, the topic (or subject) “yī gè rén” (“a person”) is in fact general.

Generic and Nonspecific Concepts

We should now fit general sentences into the principles of sentence structure already laid out for specific sentences. Every sentence contains known information, which is the topic of the sentence, and new information which it is conveying, which is the comment. In a specific statement, the known information refers to an identified entity and is termed definite, and the new information, if indefinite, receives an identity from the sentence, and can be definite in a subsequent sentence.

“Students write essays” does not provide information on any particular student or essay, but on students and essays as a class or group. In what sense, therefore, does it lie within our topic-comment structure? Let us start with the topic, “students”. It provides information on a class of entities which is known to both speaker and hearer because it is clearly delimited from other classes such as “children” or “lecturers”. It also refers to all students. The comment describes a class of entities, “essays”, which students write. However, it does not refer to all essays, since there may be essays which are not written

¹ Lewis, 117.

² McGregor, 18-9.

³ Yip & Rimmington, 111.

by students, for example those by schoolchildren. The sentence delimits those essays which students write, so that they may be referred to later as “students’ essays”.

This suggests a comparison between a specific and a general sentence. A specific sentence refers to a definite noun and assigns an identity to an indefinite noun. A general sentence distinguishes between a general noun which describes a delimited class and one which does not describe a delimited class. We propose the term *generic* for a general entity whose limits are known to the speaker and hearer, and *nonspecific* for a general entity whose limits are not established. A general sentence refers to a generic noun and assigns limits to a nonspecific entity so that it can be generic. In this way, general sentences fit into the topic-comment structure.

The comparison with specific sentences also applies to the existential construction described in Chapter 1. Just as a specific existential sentence introduces a specific entity, a general existential sentence introduces a general entity. The above sentence can be rephrased “There are essays which students write”. It cannot be rephrased **“There are students who write essays”*, because that implies that there are students who do not.

The distinction between generic and nonspecific classes may seem of limited value. In fact, failure to observe it can cause a serious lack of clarity. A suitable illustration is to compare:

“On Fridays, meetings take place”; and
“Meetings take place on Fridays”.

Assuming that the topics of these two sentences are generic, the first one means that each Friday, a meeting occurs, but may occur on other days; “Fridays” is generic and “meetings” is nonspecific. The second one means that meetings occur on Fridays, but there may be Fridays when they do not occur; “meetings” is generic and “Fridays” is nonspecific.

The above examples are of general sentences, in which the topic and therefore the comment are general. It follows from our argument that a general topic is generic. In addition, we have noted that a sentence can have a specific topic and a general comment, for example “She likes Dickens’ novels” or “She takes the 8.12 train every day”. The general comment can be generic, as in those examples, or nonspecific, as in “She eats an egg for breakfast” or “She goes to work by bicycle”. A nonspecific comment may be something whose identity is unimportant, for example:

“Henry is baby-sitting;” “Sheila is flat-hunting;” “She is looking for a pen”.

The identity of the baby, the flat, or the pen, are not important to the meaning of these sentences, and are neither definite nor indefinite. They are general, but do not refer to a known class of entities and are therefore nonspecific. The last example again illustrates an important difference of meaning which English usage does not convey:

“She is looking for a pen (indefinite)” refers to particular pen which is lost;
“She is looking for a pen (nonspecific)” refers to any pen able to fulfil her requirements.

In an identification sentence, a comment which is grammatically indefinite is in fact nonspecific. An example is “She is an architect”. If “an architect” in this sentence were indefinite, it would mean “a particular architect who has not yet been identified”. In fact, it means “a member of the class of persons called “architect”, and so is nonspecific.

Some languages have a more consistent usage. In French, generic nouns take the definite article, and nonspecific nouns take the partitive article as though they were indefinite:

“Les oiseaux ont des ailles.” “[The] Birds have [some] wings.”
“Les hommes sont des animaux.” “[The] Men are [some] animals.”

In Italian, Spanish, German, Greek, and Hungarian, generic nouns take the definite article and nonspecific nouns (unlike in French) take no article:

Italian: “Il vino fa male alla salute.” “Wine is bad for your health.”

[The wine makes bad to-the health.]
“Temo la vecchiaia.” “I fear old age.” [I-fear the old age.]
“Vendono fiori.” “They sell flowers.”
“Bevo té.” “I’m a tea-drinker.” [I-drink tea.]

Spanish: “Las ordenadores hacen imposibles los problemas difíciles.”
“Computers make difficult problems impossible.”
[The computers make impossible the problems difficult.]
“Odio las novelas di ciencia ficción.” “I hate science fiction novels.”
[I-hate the novels of science fiction.]
“Los lagartos comen moscas.” “[The] Lizards eat flies.”
“Escribo novelas di ciencia ficción.” “I write science fiction novels.”
[I-write novels of science fiction.]

German: “Der Kampf um die Freiheit der Rede geht weiter.”
“The struggle for [the] freedom of speech continues.”
“Der Kampf um Freiheit geht weiter.” “The struggle for freedom continues.”

Greek: “Το άλογο είναι ωραίο ζώο.” “The horse is [a] lovely animal.”
“Αγαπάει τα βιβλία.” “She loves [the] books.”
“Γράφει βιβλία.” “She writes books.”

Hungarian:
“A bálna a legnagyobb emlősállat.” “Whales are the largest mammals.”
[The whale the largest mammal.]
“Minden este János levest főz.” “Janos makes soup every night.”
[Every evening Janos soup cooks.]

In Spanish, since a nonspecific noun which is a subject cannot be a topic, it usually occurs after its verb:

“Caían bombas por todas partes.” “Bombs were falling everywhere.”
[Were-falling bombs everywhere.]

In Russian, the genitive case is used to indicate an indefinite quantity. It can also be used to mark a noun as nonspecific in a stative sentence:

“U menya est’ rabota.” “I have some work to do.”
[With me there-is of-work (genitive)-.]

In Russian identification statements, an identity which is represented as permanent is nominative (an unmodified noun) and an impermanent (nonspecific) identity may be in the instrumental case:

“Po professii on byl botanik.” “By profession, he was [a] botanist (nominative).”
“Vo vremya voiny ya byl ofitserom.” “During [the] war, I was [an] officer (instrumental).”

The Russian suffixes “-to” and “-nibud” is used to distinguish between between, respectively, indefinite specific and nonspecific nouns:

“On izuchaet kakoi-to yazyk.” “He is studying some (specific) language.”
“On pridumaet kakoe-nibud’ neotlozhnoe delo.”
“He is bound to think up some urgent business or other.”
[He will-think-up some (nonspecific) urgent business.]

In Finnish, the partitive case, which is used to indicate a number, can mark a noun as nonspecific in an existential sentence:

“Purkissa on leipää.” “There is bread in the tin.” [Tin-in is bread (partitive)-.]
“Kadulla on autoja.” “There are cars in the street.” [Street-in is cars (partitive)-.]

Some languages assume that an unmarked noun in object position is nonspecific. To make the noun specific, whether definite or indefinite, it must be marked. In Spanish and other Iberian languages, a human direct object is preceded by “a” (“to”) if it is specific, not if it is nonspecific:

“Vi a tres ingleses que llevaban pantalones a cuadros.” (specific)
 “I saw three Englishmen wearing check trousers.”
 [I saw to three Englishman who wore trousers with check.]
 “Vi tres ingleses en la playa.” “I saw three Englishmen on the beach.” (nonspecific)

The same is true of Hindi, with the postposition “ko” (“to”):

“aurat bacce ko bulā rahī hai” “A woman is calling a child.” (specific)
 [Woman child-to calling is.]
 “aurat baccā bulā rahī hai” “A woman is calling a child.” (nonspecific)
 [Woman child calling is.]

In the first Spanish sentence, the wearing of check trousers identifies the Englishmen, and in the first Hindi sentence a particular child is being called. In the second Spanish and Hindi sentences, the identities of the Englishmen and the child are not significant. In Hungarian, an object in focus position is indefinite if it has the article “egy” (“a”/“an”) and nonspecific if it has no article:

“Apám egy újságot vesz.” “My father is buying a newspaper.” (specific)
 [Father-my a newspaper (accusative) buys.]
 “Apám újságot vesz.” “My father is buying a newspaper.” (nonspecific)
 [Father-my newspaper (accusative) buys.]

In the first sentence, a particular, but unidentified, newspaper is being bought; in the second, the identity of the newspaper is not significant. Similarly, in Persian an unmarked noun in object position is nonspecific. It becomes specific through being marked with “-i” (indefinite) or (as noted earlier) with “-ra” (definite):

“kar mikonam” “I am working.” [Work I-do.]
 “kari mikonam” “I am doing some work.” [Work-a I-do.]
 “dombale aparteman migardam” “I’m apartment-hunting.” [After apartment I-walk.]
 “dombale apartemani migardam” “I’m looking for an apartment.”
 [After apartment-a I-walk.]

In Turkish, a nonspecific noun is not marked by an article, but by case: accusative for specific and absolute for nonspecific:

“Her gun bir gazeteyi okuyorum.” “Every day I read a newspaper.” (specific)
 [Ever day a newspaper (accusative) I-read.]
 “Her gun bir gazete okuyorum.” “Every day I read a newspaper.” (nonspecific)
 [Ever day a newspaper (absolute) I-read.]

The first sentence refers to a particular, but unidentified, newspaper; in the second, the identity of the newspaper is not important.

Some Inuit verbs, principally possessive in meaning, are available in both a discrete and a suffixed form. The object of the discrete form is specific and of the suffixed form is nonspecific. The specific object is marked with “-mik” (“with”) if it is indefinite, and unmarked if it definite:

“Tuttu takuaa.” “He saw the caribou.” [Caribou see-he-them.]
 “Tuttumik takuvuq.” “He saw some caribou.” [Caribou-with see-he.]
 “Tuttusivuq.” “He saw caribou.” [Caribou-see-he.]

In Maori, a specific object is marked with “i” and an article, while a nonspecific object is unmarked:

“Kei te tope ngā kaimahi i ngā rākau.” “The workers are felling the trees.”
 [Are felling the workers (object) the trees.]

“Kei te tope rākau ngā kaimahi.” “The workers are tree-felling.”
[Are felling trees the workers.]

Specific and General Sentences

A few further remarks are appropriate on the distinct between general and specific sentences. We noted earlier that a definite topic can have a specific or a general comment:

“Mr Brown drove to work on Tuesday”; “Mr Brown drives to work on Tuesdays”.

In this general sentence, “Tuesdays” can be generic (all Tuesdays) or nonspecific (some unspecified Tuesdays). If we wished to convey that they were nonspecific, we would say:

“Mr Brown drives to work on a Tuesday”.

This use of an indefinite article does not refer to an indefinite Tuesday, that is a particular Tuesday which has not been identified, but to a nonspecific Tuesday, that is an unspecified member of a class of days called Tuesday. Similar sentences in which a nonspecific entity is marked with an indefinite article are:

“Holiday-makers like a seaside resort;” “Commuters to Bristol take a motorway;”
“He helps in a lab on Saturdays;”

However, the same sentence constructions could include a definite entity in the comment as well as in the topic:

“Holiday-makers like Blackpool;” Blackpool is liked by holiday-makers”.
“Commuters to Bristol take the M4;” “The M4 is taken by commuters to Bristol”.
“Saturdays is when he helps in the lab;” “He helps in the lab on Saturdays”.

On this examples, we can define a *general sentence* as one which may contain generic, nonspecific, and definite entities. It cannot contain indefinite entities.

Let us now consider some examples in which both the topic and comment are specific:

“Mr Brown drove to work on a Tuesday.” “Mrs Smith had eggs for her breakfast.”

These sentences convey no information on the work that Mr Brown went to or the eggs which Mrs Smith ate. If we wished to do that, we would mark those words as specific:

“Mr Brown drove to a job of work on a Tuesday.”
“Mrs Smith had some eggs for her breakfast.”

The first instances are of unspecified members of a class of activity called “work” and a class of entities called “eggs”; they are nonspecific. The second instances are of particular jobs of work and particular eggs; they are indefinite. We may define a *specific sentence* as a one which may contain definite, indefinite, and nonspecific entities. It does not contain generic entities. These rules can be summarised in a table:

Allowed entities	Definite	Indefinite	Generic	Nonspecific
Specific sentence	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
General sentence	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

General Pronoun

An alternative method of indicating that a noun is generic is the “whatever” construction. This refers to an instance of a noun, verb, or attribute, but indicates that its identity is unknown. Such a

construction is expressed in English by an interrogative pronoun and the suffix “-ever”. An nonspecific general noun can be expressed by the pronoun “any”:

“Whoever it is, I cannot see him.”
“Whatever has happened, we will support you.”
“She can have any book she wants”.

Interrogative pronouns are often used for general nouns, because both questions and general expressions indicate uncertainty:

Italian attaches the suffix “-unque”:

“Datemi qualunque libro.” “Give me any book whatever.” [Give-me whatever book.]

Russian attaches the words “by ni” (“should not”):

“Kto by eto ni skazal, on oshibsya.” “Whoever said that was mistaken.”
[Who should that not said, he mistook-himself.]

The Arabic word for “any” is “ʔayyu”:

“ʔayyu bābin min ʔabwābi l-ʔamali” “any sort of work at all”
[any sort from among sorts the-work]

Persian attaches the word “har” (“every”):

“har ke mixahad beyayad zud beyayad” “Whoever wants to come must be quick.”
[Every who wants he-come (subjunctive) quick he-come (subjunctive)-.]

Indonesian attaches the word “saja” (“only”):

“Taruh barang itu di mana saja.” “Put those things anywhere.”
[Put thing those in where only.]
“Ambil berapa saja.” “Take any amount you like.” [Take how-many only.]

Japanese attaches the word “demo” (“even”):

“Ano toshokan wa dare demo hairemasu.”
“Anyone can enter the library.” [That library (topic) who even enter.]
“Itsu demo kamaimasen yo.” “Any time will be fine.” [When even not-mind!]

Hindi attaches the indefinite pronoun “kuch” (“some”) to the relative:

“jo kuch karnā cāhie, use āp kījie” “Please do whatever has to be done.”
[What some doing is-necessary, that you please-do.]

Quantity

If a noun, verb, or attribute can be identified and distinguished from another noun, verb, or attribute of the same description, it can be counted or measured. This is done by giving it a *quantity*. A quantity has to count something. In the case of a discrete object, that is the object. In the case of something that is not a discrete object, it is necessary to state what is being counted. That is the *unit*. The following are different sorts of quantity and unit:

“15 apples”; “three kilos of apples”; “three litres of water”; “three pieces of paper”;
“one ream of paper”, “two loaves of bread”, “five bales of cloth”, “six metres of rope”;
“seven head of cattle”; “five blows of the axe”; “three columns of the newspaper”.

The unit may refer to a general category of something without counting or measuring the item itself:

“three breeds of dog”; “two weights of paper”; “six shades of blue”; “five kinds of happiness”.

Verbs and attributes can be counted even when they are not expressed as nouns:

“He called for help five times.”

“These two products are different from each other in five different ways.”

“The road is ten kilometres long.”

A quantity may not only be a count of something but may also be a proportion of a single entity:

“He had read two-thirds of the book.”

“They walked one-half of the distance.”

“The room was three-quarters full.”

“He had one-quarter finished the painting.”

“John was half starved.”

Many languages recognise that all quantities measure a unit, by expressing a “measure word” even for discrete objects. By this means, the nature of what is being counted is always made clear:

Chinese: “sān gè xuésheng”	“three students”	[three unit student]
“sān gè miànbāo”	“three loaves of bread”	[three unit bread]
“yī zhāng zhǐ”	“a piece of paper”	[one sheaf paper]
“yī tiáo hé”	“a river”	[one unit river]
“yī lì mǐ”	“a grain of rice”	[one grain rice]
“yī chǎng zúqiú”	“a soccer match”	[one event soccer]
“yī bēi kāfēi”	“a cup of coffee”	[one cup coffee]
“yī gōngjīn píngguǒ”	“a kilo of apples”	[one kilo apple]
“yī qún rén”	“a crowd of people”	[one crowd people]
“yī zhǒng sīxiǎng”	“a kind of thinking”	[one kind idea]
Turkish: “sekiz tane mendil”	“eight handkerchiefs”	[eight unit handkerchiefs]
Malay: “tiga buah meja”	“three tables”	[three unit tables]
Japanese:		
“Maitsuki hon o sansatsu katte imasu.”		
“I’m buying three books per month.”		
[Each-month book _(object) three-unit buying is.]		

Russian expresses the fact that a quantity must refer to a unit by requiring (in certain circumstances) that a quantified noun is in the genitive case (“of”):

“shest’ dollarov” “six dollars” [six of-dollars]

“desyat’ gostinits” “ten hotels” [ten of-hotels].

Similarly, Finnish uses the partitive case (“part of”) after quantities:

“neljä maata” “four countries” [four country _(partitive)]

“puoli tuntia” “half an hour” [half hour _(partitive)]

“kilo omenoita” “a kilo of apples” [kilo apples _(partitive)]

“joukko ihmisiä” “a crowd of people” [crowd people _(partitive)].

When a definite entity is counted or measured, it does not follow that the quantity itself is definite. We recall that a definite entity is one which can be identified from other entities. This is so of:

“my five sisters”; “the six books which you borrowed; “the first half hour”,

because the sisters, books, and half-hour can be distinguished from other sisters, etc. However:

“five of my sisters”; “six of the books which you borrowed”; “half of the hour”

are not distinguished from others of the sisters, books, or half-hours and are therefore indefinite. If the entity which is being counted or measured is indefinite, then the quantity is also indefinite:

“five sisters”; “six books”; “half an hour”.

Languages generally possess a word which expresses an indefinite quantity, usually called a “partitive article”. In English, this is “some” or “part of”:

“some of my sisters”; “some of the books which you borrowed”; “part of the hour”;
“some sisters”; “some books”; “some time”.

Since none of these expressions identify what is being counted or measured, they are all indefinite. Languages also possess a word which expresses the totality of something. If that which is totalised is definite, then the expression is definite, since there is no doubt as to the quantity selected:

“all of my sisters”; “all the books which you borrowed”; “the whole hour”.

Totality may also express a generic class, which as we have seen is definite because is it distinguished from other generic entities:

“all sisters”; “all books”; “all time”.

However, the totality of an indefinite entity is indefinite if it cannot be distinguished from other entities:

“a whole library”; “a whole hour”.

The Spanish plural of the indefinite article “uno/una” indicates an indefinite number:

“Le dieron unas monedas.” “They gave him a few coins.” [To-him they-gave some coins.]
“Tomamos unas cervezas.” “We had a few beers.” [We-had some beers.]

In Russian, just as the genitive case is used after some numbers, it means an indefinite quantity if no number is stated:

“Vam možno nalit’ chayu” “Can I give you some tea?”
[For-you possible pour of-tea (genitive)?]
“mnogo sakharu” “much sugar” [much of-sugar (genitive)].
“mnogo družei” “many friends” [many of-friends (genitive)].

Similarly, in Finnish the partitive case without a number indicates an indefinite quantity:

“Ostan jäätelöä.” “I’ll buy some ice-cream.” [Buy-I ice-cream (partitive)].
“Sellaisia virheitä esiintyy usein.” “Such mistakes (partitive) occur often.”

Chinese: “yī xiē shū” “some books” [one some book]
“yī xiē shuǐ” “some water” [one some water].

We have seen that the quantity “all” can indicate a generic quantity. The quantity “however much”/“however many” is nonspecific, and is independent of whether the item counted is definite or indefinite:

Definite noun

“however many of the houses in the road”
“however much of the sixteen kilometres”
“however much of the library”

Indefinite noun

“however many houses”
“however far”
“however many books”

In English, a distinction exists between nouns which can be counted and those which cannot. The uncountable nouns are supposed to be more “abstract” than the countable ones. It will be seen from this chapter that the true distinction is between specific entities, which can be counted, and general entities which cannot. Nouns which are commonly considered “abstract”, that is not material, are in fact the expression of a verb or attribute in noun form, which may be specific or general. Are “love” and “hatred” uncountable? No, because it is possible to speak of someone’s loves and hatreds for particular objects. Is “excitement” uncountable? No, because a person can experience several excitements. Is “economy” uncountable? No, because it is possible to speak of the economies of the UK, France, Germany, etc. Is “water” uncountable? No, because different waters come from different natural springs, or can be measured: “three litres of water”.

Generic general concepts such “humankind” and “retailing” refer to all of their class. Other general concepts such as “bread” or “furniture” can be generic or nonspecific:

“Bread is either white or wholemeal.” “The family breaks bread together on Sundays.”

A generic concept cannot be counted because by its nature it is unique. An nonspecific concept cannot be counted because it has yet to be separated from any other entity.

The following are examples of Spanish words with a singular and plural, whose equivalents in English are uncountable. The English nouns are considered to be substances or abstract nouns. The list shows that the designation of the English noun as uncountable is an arbitrary feature of the language:

<u>singular</u>		<u>plural</u>	
“bondad”	“goodness”	“bondades”	“good acts”
“información”	“information”	“informaciones”	“news items”
“pan”	“bread”	“panes”	“loaves of bread”
“progreso”	“progress”	“progresos”	“advances”
“tristeza”	“sadness”	“tristezas”	“sorrows”
“trueno”	“thunder”	“truenos”	“thunderclaps”

*“Goodnesses”, *“(in)formations”, *“(in)bread”, etc are not permissible in English.