

# The definite article and its positions in the structure of the DP: evidence from Irish English and Alemannic\*

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## Abstract

In this squib, the comparison of standard and non-standard varieties of German and English provides evidence for a fine-grained DP-structure regarding the position of the definite article. Besides different positions reflecting the well known distinction between generic and deictic readings, I will argue that only deictic determiners are located in D, whereas so called weak definites occupy a lower position. This lower position, labelled artP, is argued to be the highest functional projection in nominal expressions, which are non-deictic. The suggested structure is an elaboration of the structure developed by Borer (2005).

**Keywords:** DP structure, weak definites, genericity, spoken (non-standardized) varieties of English and German

## Resumo

Neste *squib*, a comparação entre as variedades padrão e não padrão do alemão e do inglês provê evidências para uma estrutura refinada do DP no que diz respeito à posição ocupada pelo artigo definido. Além do fato de que posições diferentes refletem a já conhecida distinção entre as leituras genérica e dêitica, argumentarei que apenas os determinantes dêiticos estão localizados em D, enquanto os chamados definidos fracos ocupam uma posição mais baixa. Essa posição, rotulada artP, seria a projeção funcional mais alta em expressões nominais, que são não dêiticas. A estrutura sugerida é uma elaboração da estrutura desenvolvida por Borer (2005).

**Palavras-chave:** estrutura do DP, definidos fracos, genericidade, variedades faladas (não padrão) do inglês e do alemão

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## 1 Introduction

Longobardi (1994) has shown that bare NPs are predicates, so a DP must be projected in order to turn them into arguments, unless they are lexically governed. In this paper, the assumption that bare NPs are predicates will essentially be followed. However, examples from German and English dialects will provide evidence for a more fine grained DP-structure, in which  $D^0$  is not necessarily projected. A functional projection below  $D^0$  is sufficient to turn bare NPs into arguments. This functional projection is the locus of weak (morphologically reduced) articles, going along with a weak definite interpretation (POESIO, 1994; CARLSON et. al, 2006, among others). In the following, instead of using the term ‘article’, the term ‘weak definite’ will be used for articles which have a distinct form in German and are restricted in their referential properties. DP will be shown to be the locus of deictic and anaphoric reference and thus only hosting ‘strong’ definites, referred to as determiners (Det) in this paper

Alemannic (ALM), a southern German dialect, and Irish English (IrE) will provide the relevant examples for a partition of the DP with respect to the distinction of generic NPs, weak definites and Dets (establishing anaphoric/deictic reference). This partition manifests itself in distinct functional projections which can host the definite article (DA) — two low ones, in fact, Borer’s (2005) *Cl(assifier)P(hrase)* and *#P* — an intermediate one I will call *artP*, and *DP*.<sup>1</sup> The label *artP* is intuitive, as only weak definites occur in both *CIP* and *artP*, whereas *DP* is the locus of anaphoric and deictic reference where only Dets are merged. Weak definites cannot establish anaphoric or deictic reference, as they lack the referential feature overtly spelled out in the *d*-component of the German DA. This *d*-component can be missing in the weak counterpart, and only the  $\varphi$ -features remain, as illustrated in Table 2 in section 2.3. The  $\varphi$ -component is restricted in its referential ‘power’ and can thus not be in *D*. The English DA, on the other hand, is restricted as it consists only of the *d*-component but lacks the  $\varphi$ -part. It is thus ‘halfway in between’ a Det and an article, which also becomes evident from its distribution and its ability to establish deictic and anaphoric reference, but its inability to license ellipsis, which results in the requirement of one-insertion in these cases.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 provides a short overview of the DA and its distribution in Standard German (StG) and Standard English (StE), comparing it with non-standard varieties ALM and IrE. Section 3 elaborates on the distinction between Det and weak definites and their referential properties. Section 4 defines the functional positions in which the DA can be merged in the structure of the DP. Section 5 concludes with a speculative account of the distinction between the standard and non-standard varieties with respect to the reason why the standard does not always realise a DA in the contexts in which it is used in the non-standard

<sup>1</sup>The label *artP* is taken from Roehrs (2006); however it is essentially different from the *artP* in his work.

varieties.

## 2 The definite article in German and English

Both English and German show almost the same distribution of the DA. The main difference is that the English DA is invariant in its form, whereas the German DA agrees in case, number and gender with the noun it precedes. The plural DA is only marked for case, but not for gender. In addition to this inflectional difference, German has a weak and a strong form of the DA (SCHWARZ, 2009), a distinction which is not present in English. The strong article consists of the d-part plus  $\varphi$ -features, whereas the weak form lacks the d-component, and the  $\varphi$ -component attaches to a preposition. The different forms are illustrated in Table 1.

	German Strong Article		German Weak Article	English
	<i>masc, fem, neut</i>	<i>Plural</i>	<i>masc, fem, neut</i>	<i>Sing. &amp; Pl. all cases</i>
<i>Nominative</i>	d-er, d-ie, d-as	d-ie		
<i>Accusative</i>	d-en, d-ie, d-as	d-en	an-s	
<i>Dative</i>	d-em, d-er, d-em	d-en	zu-m, zu-r, zu-m	the
<i>Genitive</i>	d-es, d-er, d-es	d-er		

**Table 1. The form of the definite article in English and German**

The important point with respect to the strong vs. the weak form of the German article is that they are related to the referential property of the DA and its position in the DP, which will become evident in the following sections.

### 2.1 Use and function of the definite article in English and German

The function of the DA is generally analysed as the identification of a particular discourse-referent which is either familiar or unique or both (e.g., BIRNER & WARD, 1994). When expressing familiarity, the referent must have been introduced into the discourse, which is not necessarily the case with uniqueness, as Birner & Ward (1994) or Epstein (2001) point out:<sup>2</sup>

- (1) *unique but not familiar*: Would you please get the tea towel from the kitchen?
- (2) *familiar but not unique*: Please, open the window.

The concepts of uniqueness and familiarity can be divided into several sub-concepts in which the DA can be used felicitously. For Standard English (StE), as well as for Standard

<sup>2</sup>Example (1) is adapted from Birner & Ward (1994, p. 93), and (2), from Birner & Ward (1994, p. 100).

German (StG), the following contexts in which the DA generally occurs, based on Hawkins (1978) and Quirk et al. (1985), can be listed:

- (3) a. **Superlatives** (*uniqueness*)  
**The** best chocolate is produced in Switzerland.
- b. **Cataphoric reference** (*familiarity*)  
I suggest we take **the** route through the woods to get home.
- c. **Anaphoric reference** (*familiarity*)  
I have a nice house and **the** house also has a big garden.
- d. **Deictic reference/ Immediate situation** (*uniqueness*)  
**The** example here shows an instance of deictic reference.
- e. **General knowledge** (*uniqueness*)  
**The** sun, **the** Prime Minister.
- f. **Accommodation/ bridging** (*familiarity*)  
I went back to my hotel, but **the** receptionist was gone and I couldn't get in.

In addition to the list above, in both languages, the DA can also be used with generic DPs, in both StG and StE — alongside other means to express genericity, as illustrated below with examples adapted from Quirk et al. (1985, p. 281):

- (4) a. **The tiger** is a dangerous animal (DA + singular noun)
- b. **Tigers** are dangerous animals (bare plural)
- c. **A tiger** is a dangerous animal (Indefinite article + singular noun)

StG and StE differ in that, in English, the DA is missing in the following contexts: abstract concepts, seasons, and social institutions, as exemplified in (5-7):<sup>3</sup>

- (5) **Das Leben** ist zu kurz, um unglücklich zu sein  
**the life** is too short to miserable to be  
‘Life is too short to be miserable’
- (6) Wir werden i-**m Sommer** nach Frankreich gehen  
We will **in-the summer** to France go  
‘We will go to France in summer’<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>There are also differences regarding the various standard varieties in English for these particular examples, a point which is also addressed in Quirk et al. (1985), but which cannot be elaborated on here. Note that in these examples, the third line, dedicated to the English translation, shows that in these contexts the DA is missing.

<sup>4</sup>According to Quirk et al. (1985, p. 278), the article here is “usually, but not always, omitted” in English. My (also British English) informant reports that she accepts both (depending on context).

- (7) Meine Tochter wird in L. in **die/zu-r Schule** gehen  
My daughter will in L. **in the/to-the school** go  
'My daughter will go to school in L.'

The contexts listed above, in which the DA is used in StE and StG, however, are not the only ones. As Birner & Ward (1994, p. 95) point out, familiarity (and unique identifiability) “is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition” for the felicitous use of the DA. This is particularly evident when non-standard varieties of English and German are considered. Thus, the question is why and when the DA can be used in other contexts than the ones listed above and what function it has then.

In the next section, the focus will be on IrE and the question of whether the differences between StE and IrE can be analysed in terms of the influence of the Irish substrate, as it has been claimed by Hickey (2007). It will turn out that StE is in fact the ‘odd one out’ and that IrE behaves like other Germanic languages in its distribution of the DA.

## 2.2 The definite article in Irish English

In IrE, the DA shows a wider distribution (HICKEY, 2007; FILPPULA, 1999; SABBAN, 1982) than in StE, which Hickey (2007) calls the “overuse” of the DA. This wider distribution includes the following contexts:

- (8) a. **generic reading with DA and plural nouns**  
He doesn't like the children
- b. **seasons**  
I'll go in the summer
- c. **common diseases**  
He has the headache<sup>5</sup>
- d. **mass nouns**  
You really like the salt
- e. **proper names**  
You should ask the sister Nora
- f. **close relatives**  
You should ask the mother

Comparing this list with the examples in (5-7) from StG hints at a solution other than influence from Irish — as, obviously, a similar pattern can be found in a closely related Germanic

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<sup>5</sup>Also listed as an option for StE in Quirk et al. (1985).

language. As it will become clear below, all examples for IrE differing from StE above pattern with the distribution of the DA in ALM.

Three lines of analysis explaining the peculiarity of the use of the DA in IrE are generally followed in the literature:

- (i) a direct connection to the Irish substrate;
- (ii) a general property of contact varieties/ non-standard varieties;
- (iii) a relation to ‘language universals’.

In the next section, it will become evident that the phenomenon under consideration is best analysed in the third sense. The Irish substrate might have some influence, but it is by no means its source.

An observation, made by Filppula (1993) and Wiltschko (2009), among others, is that the languages of the world that have a DA differ a lot in its distribution. This is related to (iii), the idea that the observed variation might be due to an underlying property of the DA and the position(s) it can be associated with in the structure of the DP, the line of analysis that will be pursued here.

Evidence for (iii), regarding the phenomenon under observation, comes from a comparison of the distribution of the DA in IrE and in ALM. ALM, spoken in southern parts of Germany, the German speaking parts of Switzerland, Alsace (France) and Vorarlberg (a region in Austria), is a very well described dialect which developed from Middle High German.

### 2.3 A comparison of Irish English and Alemannic

ALM has, just like StG, the strong and the weak form of the DA and, in addition, a reduced form, which is absent in StG (Table 2). The most important point is that ALM also shows “overuse of the DA”, in the sense of Hickey (2007). Thus, ALM provides useful insights for an analysis of the DA-distribution in English and German. Since ALM is not a contact variety, an analysis along the lines of (ii) in the previous section must be rejected. It seems to be a general property of non-standardized languages.

	<b>Strong</b>		<b>Reduced</b>	
	<i>Singular m., f., n.</i>	<i>Plural</i>	<i>Singular m., f., n.</i>	<i>Plural</i>
<i>Nominative</i>	d-er, d-ie, d-es	d-ie	dr, d, s	d', d', d'
<i>Accusative</i>	d-en, d-ie, d-es	d-ie	da, d, s	d', d', d'
<i>Dative</i>	d-em, d-er, d-em	d-ene	m/em, dr, m/em	de, de, de

**Table 2. Strong and reduced forms of the definite article in German**

In what follows, examples (9) to (14) list all the contexts in which the DA is used in ALM, but not in StG. When comparing this list to the one for IrE from the previous section, we find that ALM differs from StG in the same way as IrE differs from StE.

- (9) **proper names**  
 Do musch **d**'Laura froga (ALM)  
 Da musst du Ø Laura fragen (StG)  
 'You must ask Laura'
- (10) **close relatives**  
 Sag **dr** Muadr dia soll ans Telefo komma (ALM)  
 Sag Ø Mama, sie soll ans Telefon kommen (StG)  
 'Tell mum she shall come to the phone'
- (11) **common diseases**  
 Dr Peter hot **'s** Bauchwea (ALM)  
 Ø Peter hat Ø Bauchweh (StG)  
 'Peter has got a stomach ache'
- (12) **mass nouns**  
**d**'Nudla/ **s**'Salz/ **z**'Benzee sen/isch deirer worra (ALM)  
 Nudeln, Ø Salz, Ø Benzin sind/ist teurer geworden (StG)  
 'Pasta/ salt/ petrol has become more expensive'
- (13) **holidays/feasts**  
 A-**m** Fasching ben I emmr drbei (ALM)  
 An-Ø Fasching bin ich immer dabei (StG)  
 'At carnival, I am always there'
- (14) **generic definite plurals**<sup>6</sup>  
 Do bräuchdsch heit **d**'Gommistiefel (ALM)  
 Da bräuchtest du heute Ø Gummistiefel (StG)  
 'You would need wellies today'

We can now see that the distribution of the DA in IrE and ALM is the same. It is also interesting that in the cases in which StE and StG differ regarding their distribution of the DA — namely, that the DA is used in German, but not in English — in IrE, a DA can occur. This again provides evidence that the languages under consideration share the same underlying structure, allowing the DA to be merged in different functional positions — these are also

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<sup>6</sup>Bare nouns are the unmarked option in generic contexts in StG, but the use of the DA with generic plurals is not ungrammatical.

assumed to be present in the standard varieties. The fact that needs explanation is thus why the standard varieties do not realise the DA in those contexts in which the dialects do (rather than the ‘overuse’ in IrE and ALM).

In order to determine the position of the article(s) in the structure of the DP, a closer look at the strong and reduced forms in German will provide the relevant insights.

### 3 The weak/reduced article and its referential properties

The assumption of a common underlying structure and different positions of the DA in the DP, and thus a structural manifestation of the different referential properties it can have, has been mentioned several times above. The question now is where exactly these positions are and which positions we are talking about. In order to answer these questions, the properties of the German weak and reduced article will provide the relevant insights.

As has already been mentioned in the introduction, weak definites can only establish a non-deictic non-anaphoric reference. This has already been studied in detail by Schwarz (2009) for the StG weak article. The ALM reduced article has the same properties, as examples (15) and (16) illustrate. Anaphoric reference can only be established with weak definites when the referent is uniquely identifiable, as is the case in (16).

- |      |   |                |
|------|---|----------------|
| (15) | Dr Peter hot den/ *dr Mo ogruafa<br>Peter hat bei dem/ *beim Mann angerufen<br>Peter has called the man | (ALM)<br>(StG) |
| (16) | Dr Peter hot dr Poschdbot ogruafa<br>Peter hat beim Postboten angerufen<br>Peter has called the postman | (ALM)<br>(StG) |

The compositionality of the German article has already been mentioned in the introduction. The German article can clearly be divided into a d-component and a phi-component, which is illustrated in Table 1 and in Table 2. Since the d-part can be missing in the weak (Table 1) and reduced (Table 2) article, it is the referential property the d-part clearly brings with it that is absent in weak definites, thus restricting their referential power. What remains is the phi-component, which can attach to a preposition. However, the d-part alone is not sufficient to form a Det, as is clear from the ALM reduced article in which the phi-component is phonologically reduced but the d-part is sometimes nevertheless present.

Looking at the contexts in which we find weak definites in the examples above, we can see that we are dealing with argumental NPs. Therefore, a functional projection other than DP must also be able to turn NPs into arguments — and this is the position in which weak definites are merged. This is most evident in the German examples in which the d-component,

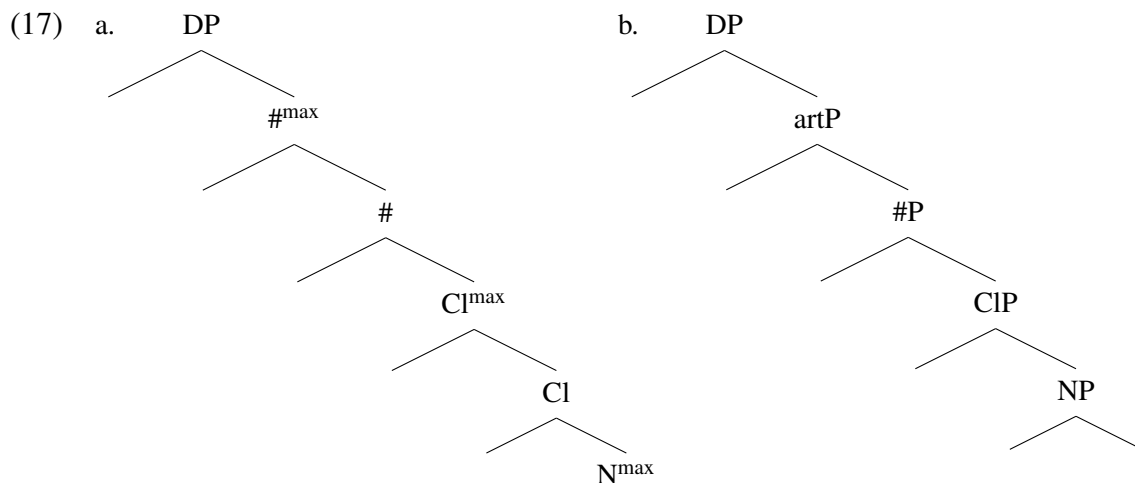


establishing anaphoric/deictic reference, is missing. Only the  $\varphi$ -features remain, which cannot be referential on their own. The position of weak definites is thus the artP, which has already been mentioned in the introduction and which will be looked at in more detail in the next section.

This seems to be a plausible story for German, but English does not have a compositional article. This problem will also be dealt with in the next section, as well as the cases of generic NPs, especially definite generic plurals.

#### 4 The position of the article in generic NPs

The (simplified) structure for all Germanic argumental NPs will be assumed to be the one in (17b), which is an elaboration of the structure Borer (2005, p. 109) developed in her framework, displayed in (17a).



The analysis essentially follows Borer's (2005) framework of a structural manifestation of the mass-count distinction and quantification in the DP. One of the central aspects of Borer's analysis is that all nouns enter the derivation as mass; the count reading results from the projection of a CIP, which is responsible for mass division and makes a count reading possible. Thus, CIP is not exclusively restricted to Classifier-languages. Borer assumes this projection to be headed by plural morphology or the indefinite article in a language like English. #P is identified as the locus of quantification. For NPs containing a definite article, Borer concludes that #P is always projected, as there is some sort of quantification. #P can be missing (no quantification), as well as CIP, giving rise to the mass reading of a noun. For argumental NPs, Borer assumes, following Longobardi (1994), that a DP is always projected and that bare NPs are predicates.

The question to be answered here is twofold: when and why does the DA start out low (in CIP or #P), in artP, or in DP? The idea is that:

- (i) in generic NPs, the DA is in CIP or #P;
- (ii) weak definites in non-generic readings are in artP;
- (iii) anaphoric/ deictic reference requires a DP projection in which a strong article is merged.

Borer (2005, p. 64) notes that “determinerless nouns [...] have a surprisingly large range of interpretations”. This is certainly true, but as the previous examples show, this also holds for cases in which the DA is present, as it can occur in many other contexts than generally assumed for StE or StG.

From Borer’s assumptions it follows that, in generic NPs, the DA (or the indefinite article in these cases) is merged in CIP, because in these cases we do not get a mass reading; but we do not get quantification either. For generic NPs with either a DA or an indefinite article, we thus have a CIP, in which they are base generated, but no #P. Borer assumes #P to always be present when a DA is merged, but since a DA or an indefinite article is possible with mass nouns in IrE and ALM without giving rise to a quantificational interpretation, this will be shown not to be the case at the end of this section.

A consequence of the article(s) starting out in CIP in generic NPs is that the noun cannot be plural, as the position which normally hosts plural morphology — namely CIP — is already occupied. However, in what follows, definite generic plurals with a generic reading do exist. Two possibilities seem to be plausible in the case of definite plurals with generic interpretation. In one analysis, the definite article is merged in CIP and no #P is projected. The plural morphology in these cases would then be regarded as a mere PF-phenomenon and, despite the plural-morpheme, there would not be a plural interpretation. However, in German, the definite article agrees in number with the noun and it establishes an Agree relation with it (WILTSCHKO, 2009). To analyse plural as a mere PF-phenomenon is thus not a very desirable solution. Another analysis, following Borik & Espinal (2015), is that in definite plurals with generic interpretation we actually have reference to every member of the species referred to. This means that the article starts out in #P, as we have some sort of quantification in these cases. CIP is then free to host the plural morphology of the noun as shown in (18):

(18) [artP [#P the [CIP -s [NP tiger] ] ] ]

Since the article is in #P, the impossibility of a generic reading combined with a quantifier or numeral follows, since the relevant position is already occupied by the article, as examples in (19) illustrate.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Examples (19a-d) are my own, example (19e) is adapted from Hickey (2007, p. 251).

- (19) a. The \*five tigers are dangerous animals (no generic reading)  
 b. \*Five tigers are dangerous animals (no generic reading)  
 c. The shark is a dangerous animal (generic)  
 d. A shark is a dangerous animal (generic)  
 e. You'd need the wellies today (generic)

For weak definites, artP has already been identified as the base position in the previous section. It has also been argued that it is this position which turns NPs into arguments, as D clearly is the position in which Dets are merged. It is thus argued that, in cases without anaphoric or deictic reference, DP is absent. When DP is projected, Det probably starts out in artP, but moves up to D.

In the previous section, the problem of accounting for the English DA has been mentioned. In the discussion above, it has been shown that the German article can be decomposed into a d-component and a  $\varphi$ -component, whereas the English article only consists of a d-component. It has been argued that it is exactly this d-component which has the property of establishing anaphoric or deictic reference and thus distinguishes Dets from weak definites.

In terms of features, this means that we must have a feature realised in this d-component which can establish a reference to the discourse, a feature which the weak form lacks. This feature will simply be called a [+referential]-feature. Combined with the  $\varphi$ -component, it can license an empty NP in German, but not in English, as the d-component alone cannot fulfill this function. This makes the English article, as mentioned in the introduction, something 'halfway in between' a Det and a weak definite and thus explains why we find it in contexts identified as weak definites as well as in contexts in which Dets occur.

At the beginning of this section, the indefinite article (IA) heading the CIP in Borer's (2005) structure has been mentioned. Since the IA brings singular interpretation with it, this is a very likely position for it to be based in. However, the IA as well as the DA can also combine with mass nouns without quantificational interpretation as (20) and (21) show. Mass interpretation clearly results from CIP not being projected and, therefore, this position is not available for the DA or IA. We might still assume #P to be projected; however, this is not very likely, given the examples (20)-(22). For these cases, the article will thus be assumed to be based in artP, and both CIP and #P are absent.

- (20) You really like the salt (IrE)  
 (21) s'Wasser kocht bei 100 Grad (ALM)  
 the water boils at 100 degrees  
 (22) Hen ihr an Schnea ghet? (ALM)  
 Have you a snow had?

What has not been dealt with so far is the fact that the standard varieties differ from the dialects in that they often lack the option of realizing the DA in contexts in which the non-standard varieties do. This will be taken up in the last section.

## 5. Summary and open questions

This paper has taken up the issue of the various contexts in which the DA can occur and the different referential properties it can have. Since the form of the German DA differs for weak definites compared to contexts in which anaphoric or deictic reference is established, this was taken as a starting point, in order to determine the positions the DA can occupy in the structure of the DP in generic NPs, weak definites, and in NPs with anaphoric/deictic reference. The analysis essentially follows Borer's (2005) framework, and thus identifies CIP and #P as the position in which the DA is situated in generic NPs. In contexts which are neither generic nor anaphoric/deictic, the DA is situated in artP, which is the projection that turns bare NPs from predicates into arguments. DP is only projected in contexts of anaphoric/deictic reference. Thus, it is not always present. The compositionality of the German article shows that the d-component brings a [+referential]-feature with it that establishes anaphoric/deictic reference. Since this d-component can be missing in weak definites, they cannot occur in D. The English article is halfway in between a weak definite and a determiner, as it can occur in both contexts. This is due to the fact that it has the d-component, but lacks the  $\varphi$ -part of its German counterpart.

This way, we can account for the various contexts in which a DA can be realised in the non-standard varieties under investigation. The open question is why the standard varieties are more restricted, even though assumed to share the same structure with non-standard varieties. For German, we might speculate that it has to do with the form of the article, which, when it does not attach to a preposition, does not differ for weak definites and Det. Therefore, for pragmatic reasons and so as to avoid ambiguity, speakers might tend to not realise the article rather than using the form which might be wrongly interpreted as strong.

For English, influence from other languages has been mentioned, which in the literature led to the hypothesis of the Irish substrate as the source for the distribution of the DA in IrE. It might thus be the case, that, since there is not a weak form of the article, the varying distribution in the different standard and non-standard varieties is due to differences in contact with other languages and thus is also not to be explained syntactically. However, this is quite speculative; additional empirical data and further research are both needed in order to address this issue.

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