

The political power of 'the': A linguistic analysis

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A new study of the English definite article "the" demonstrates that even seemingly drab function words can send powerful social and political signals. The study "Pragmatics and the social life of the English definite

article," by Eric Acton (Eastern Michigan University) will be published in the March, 2019 issue of the scholarly journal *Language*.

The author shows that using the with a plural noun to talk about a group of individuals (as in "the Americans") tends to depict that group as separate or distant from the speaker—an effect that is far less pronounced without the definite article (as in "Americans"). One can see the contrast by comparing the sentences "Americans love football" and "The Americans love football": the second, unlike the first, strongly suggests that the speaker of the sentence is not an American. In some cases, the distancing effect of the-plurals is so strong as to sound distinctly derogatory, as in expressions like "the Jews" or "the blacks".

This effect has powerful consequences in [political speech](#). Analyzing 20 years of speeches delivered in the U.S. House of Representatives, the author finds that, on average, representatives from both parties use "the" (as in "the Republicans") rather than a bare plural (as in "Republicans") more than 1.75 times as often in naming their opposing party than in naming their own. For instance, whereas Democrats use "the" 54.4% of the time in referring to Republicans as a group, they do so 30.4% in referring to Democrats. For Republicans those numbers are almost a perfect mirror image, at 26.1% and 53.3%, respectively.

The author further analyzes the use of "the" by pundits on the political talk show "The McLaughlin Group", again finding that speakers' use of "the" patterns with their political leanings. At the same time, while the pundits generally do use "the" more often in naming the party they are further from politically than in naming the party they lean toward, the differences here are subtler than in the House. The author notes this difference is attributable to a key difference in context: unlike members of the House, the pundits are speaking as outside observers and are expected to show a degree of journalistic objectivity.

The distancing effect of the-plurals like "the Americans", the author shows, is not part of the literal meaning of "the", but it's something people infer—based on a general human tendency to read into what we hear by comparing it to other expressions that might appear to offer a better mix of costs and benefits to the speaker. Moreover, these general principles appear to be universal. The author shows, for instance, that in languages with a similar set of alternatives for referring to a group of individuals, like Swedish and Dutch, using the expression with the definite article (or equivalent) tends to have the same distancing effect.

Thus, not only can function words send powerful and highly informative social signals, but through linguistic analysis one can predict the kinds of social signals particular function words are likely to send based on their core meanings and the core meanings of other related expressions.

More information: A pre-print version of the article may be found here:

https://www.linguisticsociety.org/sites/default/files/03_95.1Acton.pdf .

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