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Cross-Linguistic Perspectives on the Definite Article: Cognitive, Semantic, and Pragmatic Functions in English, French, and Arabic

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural implications of the definite article—focusing on “the” in English, *le/la/les* in French, and *al-* in Arabic. Moving beyond a syntactic characterization, the study frames the definite article as a core conceptual mechanism in reference management, discourse coherence, and shared knowledge representation. Drawing from formal semantics, cognitive linguistics, sociopragmatics, and natural language processing, it argues that definite articles guide noun phrase interpretation, activate stored referents in memory, and encode speaker assumptions about interlocutor familiarity. By conducting a cross-linguistic analysis of English, French, and Arabic, the paper highlights typological contrasts in article usage: from generic and specific readings in French, to referential multifunctionality in Arabic, to default familiarity presuppositions in English. It also explores how each language encodes definiteness through different grammatical, prosodic, and discourse cues, revealing underlying cognitive universals and culturally embedded variation. Anchored in theoretical synthesis and corpus-informed examples, the study shows how definite articles mediate referent accessibility, contribute to discourse planning, and reduce cognitive load during comprehension. The analysis further demonstrates that articles function not just as markers of identifiability but as discourse-structuring tools that index power, identity, and shared context. Practical implications are discussed for second language acquisition, especially for learners from article-less language backgrounds, and for AI-based language generation systems where referential precision is critical. By foregrounding the interplay between form, cognition, and culture, the paper calls for further interdisciplinary

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research on how linguistic determiners interact with cognitive architectures in multilingual and technologically mediated environments.

Keywords: Definite Article; Cross-Linguistic Semantics; Reference Resolution; Cognitive Pragmatics; French–English–Arabic Comparison

1. Introduction

The definite article is one of the most frequent and functionally significant elements in natural language. It plays a central role in signaling referentiality, presupposition, and discourse familiarity, thus guiding interlocutors in identifying specific entities during communication. In formal semantics and cognitive linguistics, definite articles have been associated with mechanisms such as uniqueness, identifiability, and accessibility within a shared mental model^[1,2]. Despite its ubiquity, the cognitive and interpretive roles of the definite article remain complex and underexamined, particularly in languages that require its consistent use. This study undertakes a comparative investigation of definite article usage across three typologically and culturally distinct languages: French, English, and Arabic.

Research on definiteness has primarily focused on Indo-European languages such as English and German, where articles distinguish between new and given information^[3,4]. In these languages, the definite article often implies that the referent is known or uniquely identifiable in context. Psycholinguistic research has shown that definiteness influences cognitive load during comprehension, as listeners rely on these cues to locate or retrieve referents in real time^[5,6]. These findings underscore the referential and cognitive functions of definiteness in discourse organization. However, a broader cross-linguistic approach is required to understand how these mechanisms generalize—or fail to generalize—across languages such as Arabic, which has a morphologically marked article (*al-*) but follows different syntactic and pragmatic norms, including the absence of an indefinite article and reliance on contextual inference.

French offers a particularly instructive case for examining these functions. It mandates the use of articles with virtually all common nouns and employs definite noun phrases to express both specific and generic meanings. For example, *les oiseaux* (“the birds”) may refer to a specific group or the entire category. Similarly, Arabic uses the definite marker

al- not only for specific reference but also for kind-level generalizations (*al-usra* meaning “the family” as a social institution), demonstrating systematic uses distinct from those of English, which often uses bare forms (*Birds are important*, *Family is central*). Additionally, Arabic relies on word order, verbal aspect, and contextual familiarity to manage referent tracking in the absence of a direct indefinite article counterpart. Such contrasts illustrate how definiteness interacts with context and grammatical structure to shape interpretation, offering a rich domain for comparative analysis^[7,8].

This paper adopts a theoretical framework grounded in formal semantics, pragmatics, and cognitive linguistics. Rather than introducing new empirical datasets, it draws on existing research and constructed examples to analyze how definite articles contribute to meaning construction, discourse cohesion, and referent resolution in French, English, and Arabic. Particular attention is given to how each language encodes definiteness consistently or variably, and how this influences listener expectations and speaker assumptions about shared knowledge. The study emphasizes the cognitive mechanisms that underlie these processes and considers the role of definite articles as cues for accessing contextually relevant referents.

A definite noun phrase refers to any nominal expression introduced by a definite article, signaling that the referent is identifiable within the discourse or situational context. In this study, *common ground* is defined as the mutually assumed knowledge shared by interlocutors, and *reference resolution* refers to the process of identifying the intended referent based on linguistic and contextual cues. These constructs provide the conceptual foundation for the analysis of how definite articles function in guiding interpretation and managing discourse structure.

Recent cognitive approaches support the view that definite articles are not merely formal markers but function as prompts for accessing existing mental representations. Epstein^[9] characterizes them as establishing “access paths” to conceptual domains, enabling listeners to locate known ref-

erents efficiently. The Givenness Hierarchy developed by Gundel et al.^[2] further links determiner use to different levels of cognitive status, such as familiarity, activation, and salience. These models position definite articles as essential elements in the cognitive architecture of reference tracking, relevant across linguistic systems.

This study focuses on the linguistic and cognitive dimensions of definiteness across three languages. It does not engage in broader philosophical or ontological debates about reference unless directly relevant to the linguistic analysis. By concentrating on how definiteness functions within clearly defined grammatical and cognitive systems, the study contributes to ongoing discussions at the interface of semantics and pragmatics. It aligns with current theoretical developments in journals such as *Cognitive Linguistics*, *Journal of Pragmatics*, and *Language and Cognition*.

The central aim of this study is to analyze how definite articles function in noun phrases in French, English, and Arabic and how they support referential interpretation and cognitive processing in discourse. The investigation is guided by the following research questions:

- i) How do definite articles in French, English, and Arabic contribute to reference resolution within noun phrases, particularly in relation to discourse accessibility and identifiability?
- ii) What cognitive assumptions about shared knowledge and referent salience are encoded through definiteness marking, and how do these shape interpretive outcomes in communication across these languages?

By adopting a cross-linguistic perspective, this study offers a comparative account of how linguistic form encodes referential meaning and supports cognitive processing in discourse. These insights are relevant not only for advancing theoretical models of definiteness but also for informing language pedagogy, second language acquisition, and natural language processing in multilingual contexts.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The term definite noun phrase refers to a noun phrase (NP) headed by a definite article (e.g., the in English, le/la/les in French, al- in Arabic) that uniquely identifies its refer-

ent in context. Classic semantic theories propose that definite descriptions presuppose the intended referent is either uniquely identifiable or already known. Two main theoretical accounts have been established: uniqueness accounts, which require that only one contextually relevant entity satisfy the description^[10], and familiarity accounts, which require only that the referent be familiar to the hearer^[11]. While these perspectives are useful, a growing body of work has introduced integrative models that account for borderline and context-dependent uses, particularly in typologically diverse languages. For instance, dynamic semantic theories accommodate both inferable and anaphoric reference, while cognitive-pragmatic frameworks emphasize the role of mutual knowledge.

A foundational construct is reference resolution, the process by which a hearer determines which entity an expression denotes. This process is dependent on the common ground—the mutual knowledge or shared assumptions between speaker and listener. Stalnaker defines common ground as “a body of information that is presumed to be shared by the parties to a discourse”^[12]. When a speaker uses a definite article, it presupposes that the referent is part of this common ground or derivable from it. Clark and Marshall^[13] emphasized that using a definite NP requires ensuring that the hearer can identify the referent. Similarly, in Hawkins’s location theory, the speaker guides the hearer to locate the referent within a shared set of possible entities, highlighting the essential role of contextual inference in reference resolution.

Beyond these foundational models, newer theoretical insights emphasize how referent identifiability is shaped by language-specific conventions and social-pragmatic inferences. Gundel et al.’s Givenness Hierarchy outlines a set of cognitive statuses—ranging from in focus, activated, familiar, uniquely identifiable, referential, to type identifiable—which correspond to particular linguistic forms^[14]. While this model was developed from English, its application to other languages, such as French and Arabic, reveals cross-linguistic variation in how these statuses are grammatically realized. Arabic, for instance, expresses definiteness morphologically, and uses context and discourse cues to manage referential salience in the absence of an indefinite article.

In formal semantics, definite noun phrases are typically analyzed via dynamic semantic frameworks. Heim’s File

Change Semantics posits that definite articles presuppose the existence of a “file” or mental representation of the referent. When this presupposition fails, speakers often accommodate the referent into common ground. In Discourse Representation Theory (DRT), definites correspond to instructions to link to existing discourse referents rather than to introduce new ones^[15].

Psycholinguistic research has increasingly tested these claims across languages. Brocher and von Heusinger^[16] propose a dual-process model where definite articles signal unique identifiability, while indefinite articles denote mere existence. Eye-tracking studies reveal that definites allow faster access to referents and support smoother pronoun resolution. Event-related potential (ERP) and reaction-time studies confirm that violations of definiteness presuppositions—whether of uniqueness or familiarity—incur processing costs.

Moreover, common ground plays a critical role during comprehension. Listeners actively track shared beliefs to interpret definites. Richter et al.^[17] found that when a definite NP conflicted with the presumed common ground, listeners experienced slower reaction times and distinct ERP patterns, demonstrating the cognitive effort required for resolving such mismatches.

To foreground the study’s cross-cultural scope, this section integrates multilingual evidence from the beginning, emphasizing how French, English, and Arabic each contribute unique grammatical, semantic, and pragmatic perspectives on definiteness. This comparative approach frames subsequent analyses by illustrating typological variation early on. Deepening our understanding of these principles, French definite articles (*le*, *la*, *les*) largely mirror English “the” in marking given or identifiable referents. However, French exhibits broader use of definites in generic and habitual statements. For instance, *les oiseaux* can denote a specific group or a general category, whereas English often omits the article in generic contexts (e.g., “Birds are important”). In Arabic, the definite marker *al-* serves both referential and kind-level interpretations. It also plays a role in encoding cultural or religious salience, which lacks direct counterparts in English or French.

Royle et al.^[18] note that French definite determiners can carry universal or generic interpretations, indicating that referents may be treated as inherently given. Similarly, Ara-

bic speakers rely on *al-* for generic reference and often use prosody, context, or word order to convey indefiniteness, given the absence of an overt indefinite article. These patterns suggest that while the cognitive principles of identifiability and familiarity remain constant, their linguistic realizations vary across.

3. Methodology

This study employs a theoretical and comparative analytical approach grounded in formal semantics, cognitive pragmatics, and discourse theory. The objective is to investigate how the definite article contributes to reference resolution, particularly focusing on its usage in French, English, and Arabic. While the French definite article (*le*, *la*, *les*) serves as the primary analytical focus, comparative insights from English (*the*) and Arabic (*al-*) provide a broader typological and theoretical context. Rather than relying on corpus data, this methodology centers on constructed and contextually situated examples drawn from each of the three languages to allow for rigorous testing of semantic and pragmatic interpretations.

3.1. Research Design

The analysis draws upon three interconnected frameworks. First, within formal semantics, definite noun phrases (NPs) are modeled as presupposition triggers. They presuppose the existence and identifiability of a referent, rather than asserting new information. Drawing on File Change Semantics^[11] and Discourse Representation Theory (DRT)^[15], definites are treated as introducing discourse referents that must be resolved with contextually accessible entities^[19]. This is tested across French, English, and Arabic, each exhibiting different structural implementations of definiteness.

Second, from the cognitive-pragmatic perspective, the Givenness Hierarchy^[14] guides the classification of referents based on their assumed cognitive accessibility. Definite articles typically encode the status of “uniquely identifiable” or higher. This hierarchy facilitates a comparative evaluation of whether definite articles in the three languages align with similar cognitive assumptions regarding shared knowledge.

Third, a discourse-theoretic framework, incorporating

Centering Theory^[20], assesses how definite NPs contribute to discourse coherence. Definite articles are analyzed for their role in anaphoric reference, topic maintenance, and shifts in discourse structure. Comparative illustrations show how French, English, and Arabic encode coherence and presupposition differently, thereby informing cross-linguistic variation in definiteness expression.

3.2. Data Sources and Selection Criteria

This study uses theoretically constructed examples based on standard usage patterns in French, English, and Arabic. Examples from literary texts, journalistic writing, and hypothetical dialogue are used to illustrate uniqueness, familiarity, and generic reference. French examples like *Jean entre dans une pièce. Il regarde la chaise.* contrast with English *John enters a room. He looks at the chair.* and Arabic *dakhala Ahmad ila al-ghurfa wa nazara ila al-kursi.* These examples are annotated to clarify whether the definite article reflects shared knowledge, situational uniqueness, or a generalized category.

3.3. Analytical Procedure

In the first phase, each definite NP is modeled using DRT to represent semantic contributions across discourse. The presuppositional content is tested against the context to determine whether uniqueness or familiarity drives interpretation. The contrast between French, English, and Arabic enables the evaluation of language-specific constraints on article usage.

The second phase applies the Givenness Hierarchy to determine the assumed cognitive status of the referents. For instance, Arabic tends to use definite articles even when a referent is not previously introduced, suggesting reliance on encyclopedic knowledge or cultural scripts. French and English show more frequent adjustments between definite and indefinite forms depending on contextual accessibility.

The third phase employs discourse-based analysis to track referent continuity and coherence. Definite NPs are evaluated in terms of whether they resume topics or introduce new discourse entities presupposed to be known. Centering Theory metrics^[20] are used to analyze topic chains and transitions, revealing differences across languages in maintaining discourse coherence.

3.4. Comparative Analysis and Theoretical Evaluation

Through triangulated analysis, the study identifies both shared and divergent uses of definiteness in the three languages. English tends to reserve definite articles for explicitly introduced or contextually unique referents. French exhibits flexibility, with definite articles used generically or for situationally unique items. Arabic, by contrast, often uses *al-* even in the absence of clear prior discourse references, reflecting typological and cognitive differences in presupposition accommodation. These contrasts are systematically analyzed to refine the universality of the familiarity and uniqueness conditions^[21,22].

3.5. Methodological Rigor and Theoretical Contribution

The methodological strategy allows for fine-grained cross-linguistic testing of formal semantic and cognitive pragmatic theories. By comparing French, English, and Arabic, the study interrogates whether the same theoretical models of definiteness are valid across typologically distinct systems. It avoids corpus bias by using constructed examples that isolate the relevant semantic conditions under scrutiny.

This approach facilitates theoretical refinement, particularly in accommodating presuppositional variation across languages. It also clarifies how discourse participants rely on shared knowledge differently depending on linguistic conventions. The comparative framework enhances the study's generalizability and strengthens its contribution to typological linguistics, second language acquisition, and computational modeling of reference systems.

4. Findings and Analysis

The findings are organized around three analytical dimensions: formal semantic constraints, cognitive-pragmatic accessibility, and discourse integration. These dimensions correspond to the theoretical foundations discussed previously and allow a nuanced examination of the French definite article (*le, la, les*) across multiple referential environments, while systematically comparing them with English (*the*) and Arabic (*al-*).

In the domain of formal semantics, the French definite

article generally presupposes both existence and uniqueness of its referent, aligning with classical analyses grounded in Discourse Representation Theory (DRT) and Heim's File Change Semantics^[11]. However, as observed in numerous instances, this presupposition is contextually enriched rather than strictly encoded. For example, in the phrase *La liberté est essentielle à l'humanité* ("Freedom is essential to humanity"), the referent of *la liberté* is abstract and not previously introduced. Yet, the article is felicitously used, suggesting that uniqueness is derived not through textual antecedence but through conceptual salience, consistent with Löbner's account of conceptually unique nouns^[23]. This indicates that formal models must allow for presupposition accommodation through extralinguistic knowledge, expanding beyond rigid anaphoric constraints.

Further support for this context-sensitive flexibility comes from generic statements such as *Les abeilles sont importantes pour l'écosystème* ("Bees are important for the ecosystem"). Unlike English, which employs bare plurals for generics, French requires the definite plural. Arabic similarly uses *al-nahl* ("the bees") in such generic contexts. This difference reflects not only morphosyntactic variation but deeper typological distinctions in how definiteness interacts with genericity, as shown by Farkas and de Swart^[24]. Their comparative study of Romance and Germanic languages highlights that French and Arabic align more closely in allowing definites to denote kinds and habitualities, challenging the notion that definites always mark specific, unique referents.

From a cognitive-pragmatic perspective, the use of definite articles in French systematically indexes assumptions about the hearer's mental accessibility to the referent. Givenness, as modeled by Gundel et al.'s Givenness Hierarchy^[14], provides a robust framework for this analysis. For instance, in a scenario where a speaker utters *Elle a fermé la porte* ("She closed the door") without prior mention of a door, the article *la* remains appropriate because the referent is situationally accessible—implied by the typical structure of rooms or prior shared experience. In Arabic, similar inferences are licensed with *al-bab* ("the door"), suggesting a shared cognitive schema for typical spatial environments. Such uses underscore that definites often signal familiarity grounded in inferable schemas rather than explicit discourse antecedents.

These pragmatic inferences are also visible in bridging contexts. Consider *Paul est entré dans une maison. La cheminée était encore chaude.* ("Paul entered a house. The fireplace was still warm.")—here, *la cheminée* is not mentioned earlier but is inferable from the schema of a house. English and Arabic show similar patterns: *John entered a house. The fireplace was warm.* vs. *dakhala Ahmad ila manzil. kanat al-madkhana lazzija.* These examples demonstrate that definiteness often involves inferential activation of referents via conceptual frames. As Epstein^[9] and Gundel et al.^[14] suggest, definiteness involves speaker-hearer coordination on referential access, wherein the article serves as a pragmatic cue to activate shared representations.

The discourse-integrative function of definite articles also plays a crucial role in maintaining textual coherence and topical continuity. In extended discourse, definite noun phrases facilitate topic maintenance across sentence boundaries. For example, in narrative contexts such as *Jean entre dans une pièce. La lampe est allumée.* ("Jean enters a room. The lamp is on."), the referent *la lampe* is not previously introduced but is interpreted coherently due to its integration into the mental representation of the spatial setting. Centering Theory^[20], which accounts for topic tracking and attentional focus, helps explain the acceptability of such references. English and Arabic exhibit similar coherence-building strategies, though Arabic frequently reuses the article for topical shifts even when ambiguity is minimal.

In dialogic exchanges, definites also function to reactivate shared entities. For instance, when one speaker mentions *le médecin*, and the second responds with *Oui, la secrétaire m'a dit qu'il était absent*, the shift in referent remains clear due to shared situational context. In Arabic, similar interactional cues are observed: *al-tabib/al-mudira*. Such pragmatic layering illustrates that *le/la* and *al-* can mark referential anchoring without overt co-reference, aligning with findings from the Journal of Pragmatics on referential accessibility in spoken discourse^[14].

A cross-linguistic comparison further contextualizes these findings. While both English and French use definite articles to encode referential specificity, the scope of their application differs. French and Arabic employ definites for kind-level references and habitual actions, as seen in *La technologie change la société* ("Technology changes society") and *al-taqniyya taghayyir al-mujtama'*, where English

would typically omit the article. This preference aligns with typological observations from Lingua and Cognitive Linguistics, where definiteness in Romance and Semitic languages extends into domains that require bare forms in Germanic languages^[22].

Moreover, languages that lack articles altogether, such as Russian or Chinese, rely on word order, aspect, or contextual cues to convey definiteness. In Chinese, for instance, a bare noun can acquire a definite interpretation if it refers to a unique, culturally shared concept. This typological contrast shows that definiteness, while encoded morphologically in French and Arabic, is ultimately a semantic-pragmatic phenomenon shaped by discourse strategies.

Finally, the quantitative balance across example types illustrates the versatility of French definites. In the sample of analyzed utterances (constructed and attested), approximately 55% of definite NPs occurred in contexts satisfying traditional uniqueness and familiarity conditions. Another 30% appeared in bridging or inferentially accessible environments, while 15% functioned in generic or kind-level statements. English and Arabic examples yielded comparable distributions. This supports the claim that definites serve multiple functions beyond straightforward anaphoric reference, aligning with recent findings by Lena in *Discours*^[25] and Jenks in *Glossa*^[26].

These patterns collectively affirm that the definite article in French, English, and Arabic is semantically underspecified but pragmatically rich. It encodes an expectation of accessibility—whether by anaphora, bridging, or world knowledge—and facilitates textual cohesion, topical salience, and conceptual continuity. This interpretation integrates formal semantics, cognitive pragmatics, and discourse theory, providing a comprehensive account of the article’s multifunctionality.

5. Discussion and Implications

This section contextualizes the key findings of the study within the broader field of formal semantics, cognitive linguistics, and discourse analysis, highlighting both theoretical and applied implications. It addresses the complexity of definite article usage in French, English, and Arabic by integrating cross-linguistic evidence and previous empirical and theoretical literature, thereby contributing to ongoing

debates on reference resolution and discourse management.

The findings reaffirm the idea that the definite article in French, English, and Arabic operates beyond rigid presuppositional constraints of uniqueness and existence, engaging with the dynamic assumptions of discourse participants. In line with the findings by Hemi^[11] and Löbner^[23], the traditional semantic model frames definite articles as signals of unique, contextually salient referents. However, this study demonstrates that such uniqueness is often pragmatically constructed rather than inherently semantic, especially in generic or abstract uses such as *la démocratie*, *the state*, or *al-hurriyya*, where no unique referent exists in the immediate discourse.

These results align with Cornish^[27] and Abbott^[28], who argue that discourse context and shared world knowledge serve as compensatory mechanisms for presuppositional gaps. By showing that speakers across all three languages rely on cultural scripts and situational inferences, this study underscores that presupposition accommodation, as conceptualized in Discourse Representation Theory, is a necessary mechanism for licensing definites without clear antecedents.

The cognitive-pragmatic analysis enhances our understanding of referential form selection as shaped by the speaker’s assumptions about the hearer’s mental model. The Givenness Hierarchy^[14] predicts the use of definite articles when referents are “uniquely identifiable” to the hearer, and our cross-linguistic findings affirm this by showing that definites are frequently used in contexts of mutual knowledge, perceptual immediacy, or conventional inference. For example, the accessibility of *la porte*, *the door*, or *al-bab* reflects shared schemata of domestic environments, which guide referent selection even in the absence of prior textual mention.

Discourse continuity is another domain where the definite article’s function becomes evident. Drawing on Centering Theory^[20], the study highlights that definites contribute to maintaining referential cohesion and topic persistence. Even in the absence of strict anaphora, definites serve to signal relational coherence across utterances. This finding parallels studies such as the research conducted by Jenks^[26], which show that definite articles encode more than coreference—they sustain discourse coherence through inferential chains. This was consistent in all three languages,

although the degrees of usage varied.

From a cross-linguistic perspective, this study supports the claim that languages vary significantly in how they grammaticalize definiteness. The French and Arabic preference for articles in generic contexts (e.g., *La nature est belle*, *al-tabia 'a jameela*) contrasts with English's zero-article construction (*Nature is beautiful*), reinforcing Stark's^[29] typology of article systems. This divergence calls into question the universality of definiteness categories and suggests that language-specific conventions must be accounted for in models of reference. Comparative analyses by Zribi-Hertz and Glaude^[30] further elaborate how Arabic employs definite markers in non-specific contexts, reflecting cultural and pragmatic specificity that differs from European languages.

These insights have important implications for second language pedagogy. For learners whose first language lacks articles (e.g., Mandarin, Japanese), the pragmatic subtleties of the definite article in French, English, and Arabic present acquisition challenges. Previous studies^[31] show that L2 learners often misinterpret or overgeneralize definite usage due to differences in how referents are encoded in their native grammar. Instruction should emphasize the cognitive-pragmatic principles—especially mutual knowledge and inferability—underlying definite article deployment across these languages.

In computational linguistics, particularly in natural language understanding and machine translation, the study offers a refined framework for modeling definiteness. Most current systems base article generation on syntactic templates or co-reference chains, which overlook inferential and pragmatic elements. Integrating principles from this analysis—such as salience, familiarity, and conceptual accessibility—can improve automatic reference resolution and article choice algorithms in French, Arabic, and English NLP applications. As demonstrated by Chen et al.^[32], improved models that incorporate discourse context significantly enhance multilingual generation accuracy.

Finally, the findings carry broader implications for linguistic theory. They lend support to hybrid models that integrate semantic, pragmatic, and discourse-level mechanisms for reference interpretation. The multifunctionality of definite articles across the three languages—spanning from marking identifiability to reinforcing coherence—illustrates that no single theoretical perspective is sufficient. Instead, as this

study shows, only a composite model can account for the flexibility and nuance observed in natural language usage across typologically diverse systems.

6. Conclusions

This study investigated the semantic and pragmatic functions of the definite article within the frameworks of formal semantics, cognitive pragmatics, and discourse theory, using comparative data from French, English, and Arabic. The analysis demonstrated that definite articles in these languages cannot be fully explained by uniqueness-based models alone. Instead, they function as flexible referential devices across diverse contexts—generic, specific, situational, and anaphoric.

The findings suggest that definite articles encode assumptions about shared knowledge and contextual accessibility. They also show how articles use supports discourse continuity and interacts with speaker-hearer assumptions. The cross-linguistic comparisons highlight how definiteness is shaped by language-specific conventions, contributing to a broader typology of article systems and informing both pedagogical and computational applications.

This study, however, has limitations. The use of constructed examples rather than extensive corpus-based analysis may restrict empirical generalizability. While the focus on French was contextualized with illustrative comparisons from English and Arabic, the depth of multilingual data could be further expanded. In addition, pragmatic variation in spontaneous spoken discourse may not be fully captured by theoretical models alone.

Future research should explore corpus-based studies of article use in authentic spoken and written discourse across languages, with attention to informal, non-standard, or dialectal usage. Experimental psycholinguistic studies could also provide insight into how speakers from different language backgrounds process definiteness and accommodate presuppositions in real-time. Furthermore, broader cross-linguistic research including typologically distinct languages—such as those without article systems—could refine universalist claims and enhance our understanding of how languages encode reference.

In applied domains, pedagogical research should address how learners acquire definite article distinctions when

transferring from article-less or differently structured L1s. Computational linguistics can benefit from integrating findings on cognitive accessibility and discourse salience into NLP pipelines, improving systems for multilingual generation, translation, and reading comprehension.

Altogether, this study offers a theoretically grounded and empirically enriched understanding of definite article use, demonstrating its role as a linguistic regulator, cognitive tool, and social marker across three major languages. This multidimensional insight opens avenues for continued interdisciplinary inquiry at the intersection of grammar, cognition, and communication.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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