In the classical grammatical tradition phonology and morphology precede syntax. Unfortunately this has meant that the use of the definite article has been somewhat neglected in comparison to questions such as its historical origin and phonetic shape.¹ In general, the standard grammars treat the definite article in Biblical Hebrew as relatively straightforward, corresponding closely with its counterparts in English and Greek.² However, there are also variant uses which, at first glance, seem to be peculiar to Hebrew. In this paper I would like to discuss some of these uses, concentrating specifically on the idea of frame-based reference.

Whether or not a noun phrase is marked with a definite article is usually related to whether the thing being talked about is known to the hearer. The simplest case is anaphoric reference where the referent is known because it has already been mentioned, as in example 1:

(1) וַיַּרְא אִשָּׁה רֹחֶצֶת מֵעַל הַגָּג אֶלֶָֽהָּוָֽהָֽבָֽתָֽ מַרְאֶ֖ה מְאֹֽד

2 Sam 11:2b

And he saw a woman bathing from the roof, and the woman was very beautiful.

It can also be the case that the referent belongs to the hearer's general knowledge. Definite expressions for things that are particularly prominent within a given speech community seem to function similarly to proper nouns such as the sun and the earth, or the river as designations for the Euphrates and Nile.

Still, there are also many examples in Biblical Hebrew where the definite article is used with a referent that would seem to be unknown to the hearer. For instance, in Genesis 22:6 we find the following sentence:

1. See James Barr, “'Determination' and the Definite Article in Biblical Hebrew,” JSS 34/2 (1989): 308, who notes that the more comprehensive German grammars of Bergsträsser and also Bauer and Leander never made it to syntax at all.
2. For instance, Barr quotes the grammars of Lambdin (§14), "The definite article of Hebrew corresponds closely to the definite article of English in usage and meaning," and GKC (§126d), "The article is, generally speaking, employed to determine a substantive wherever it is required by Greek and English." In contrast, the more recent work of Waltke and O'Connor notes that "significant differences between Biblical Hebrew and English may be observed," but then later also says that the Hebrew system, "presents many similarities to the English." Similarity is to be expected since, as Christopher Lyons notes, among worldwide languages, those that mark definiteness with an article are in the minority, and further, the definite article seems to be an areal feature with the greatest concentration being in Western Europe and around the Mediterranean. However, there are also significant variations across languages in the distribution of definite phrases. See Christopher Lyons, Definiteness, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 48.
Then he took in his hand the fire and the knife.

Here both the fire and the knife are being introduced for the first time, yet they are marked as definite. GKC §126q explains that:

Peculiar to Hebrew is the employment of the article to denote a single person or thing (primarily one which is as yet unknown, and therefore not capable of being defined) as being present to the mind under given circumstances. In such cases in English the indefinite article is mostly used.

Similar reasoning continues to be followed by more recent grammars. For instance, Waltke-O'Connor 13.5.1e states:

The article may also mark nouns definite in the imagination, designating either a particular person or thing necessarily understood to be present or vividly portraying someone or something whose identity is not otherwise indicated.

However, Joüon-Muraoka 137m seems to give the opposite explanation suggesting that a thing can somehow be definite in itself:

A thing which is not determinate in the consciousness of the writer or of him who is addressed is sometimes specifically determinate in itself; therefore the noun takes, or can take the article. This use of the article, characteristic of Hebrew, is rather frequent. It can only be translated in English by a, sometimes by a certain.

One source of confusion is that the grammars seem to be seeking a unified solution, while the relevant examples should be separated into at least two distinct categories.³ The first is what James Barr has termed a "storytelling" use where a speaker seems to use a definite noun phrase to introduce a participant who, though unknown at that point, will figure in the discourse later.⁴ In English, Barr suggests, a comparable device would be the indefinite this used to mean "a certain." For instance, perhaps, is the case of the following prophecy in Ezk 24:26-27:

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³. A third category includes generic noun phrases as well as reference to mass nouns and collectives where the definite article seems to be used more often in Biblical Hebrew than English. This category is more complicated, however, and is beyond the scope of the present paper.

⁴. Barr, 312. A similar idea may lie behind Waltke-O'Connor's phrase "vividly portraying."
On that day a fugitive will come to you to report the news,
and on that day your mouth will be opened to the fugitive...

The second category includes things that, while not known specifically, can somehow be assumed present under certain circumstances. For instance, in the following verse from the Joseph story we have the first and only mention of an interpreter with the definite noun phrase המליץ:

But they did not know that Joseph understood because an interpreter was between them.

Waltke-O'Connor gives this verse as an example, specifically noting that it is more natural in English to use an indefinite noun phrase. However, this second category is actually quite common among languages with a definite article and is commonly termed the associative use, though I will use the label frame-based reference for reasons to be discussed below. For instance, in the following example from Gn 37:31, בדם is rendered quite naturally in English with the definite article as in the blood:

Then they slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood

Another difficulty with the explanations above is that none of the grammars to be working with a particularly clear notion of definiteness, and few spend much ink defining or explaining the concept. In languages with a definite article, its prototypical use is to encode identifiability—

5. See Waltke-O'Connor §13.5.1e, example 14.
7. This is understandable in the shorter teaching grammars, but even in Waltke-O'Connor, a work devoted to syntax, there is minimal theoretical discussion of definiteness. Likewise, though Joüon-Muraoka §137 gives an extensive treatment of the definite article, it merely relates definiteness to determination without explaining what the category entails.
defined as the ability of the hearer to identify the referent of a noun phrase. The purpose of encoding identifiability is to help the hearer organize the things being discussed more efficiently.

In more technical language, the things being discussed can be called discourse referents, and the processing of a text can be described as the creation of a temporary discourse world. In the simplest case, an indefinite noun phrase is used to trigger the creation of a discourse referent, while a definite noun phrase signals that a referent already exists and can be identified. Here, the anaphoric case described in example 1 is paradigmatic. In the first clause, אִשָּׁה a woman is unidentifiable to the hearer and therefore triggers the creation of a discourse referent which can then be accessed by the definite noun phrase הָאִשָּׁה the woman.

Note that in this case, the discourse referent אִשָּׁה is a generic instance of a type which exists in the hearer's general knowledge. Rather than unidentifiable, Gundel, Hedberg, and Zacharski call this type identifiable. In contrast, the specific referent may already exist in the hearer's memory and be uniquely identifiable as an individual, for instance הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ the sun, in which case this existing referent can be copied directly into the discourse world from long term memory.

The difference between types and individuals has been termed individuation and reflects the way speakers categorize the world. We naturally organize our world by grouping the individual entities we experience into classes or types. The more individuated an entity is, the more it is conceived of as a thing in itself, rather than in relation to a class. Thus a speaker has the option to reference either a specific individual or a generic instance of a type depending on the purposes of

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8. Lyons, 275. This approach is often traced to Paul Christophersen, The Articles: A Study of their Theory and Use in English, Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1939. Christophersen's view is often termed the familiarity approach, but Wallace Chafe suggested that identifiability is a better term since a hearer may still be able to identify a referent even if they do not know the referent personally. See Wallace Chafe, "Givenness, Contrastiveness, Definiteness, Subjects, Topics, and Point of View," in Subject and Topic (Ed. Charles Li; New York: Academic Press, 1976), 39. Note that particular languages may also develop secondary functions for the article, most commonly as a quantifier.


11. The individuation hierarchy is usually traced to Alan Timberlake, "Hierarchies in the Genitive of Negation," Slavic and East European Journal 19 (1975): 123-138. The Russian Genitive of Negation is a phenomenon in which an argument of a verb that would take a structural case (nominative or accusative) in a corresponding affirmative sentence takes genitive case in the negated sentence. Timberlake found that such arguments tend to be low in individuation and referentiality. He identified several pairs of parameters that relate to individuation such as proper noun-common noun, concrete-abstract, definite-indefinite, etc.
the discourse and their evaluation of the hearer's general knowledge.

The correlation of definiteness to identifiability presents difficulties because, while the grammatical category of definiteness is binary, identifiability can be considered scalar.\textsuperscript{12}

\begin{tabular}{ccc}
(6) & Identifiable & Partially Identifiable & Unidentifiable \\
& definite & | & indefinite \\
\end{tabular}

Besides identifiable and unidentifiable, there is a region of partial identifiability, where the level of identifiability corresponds to the amount of mental effort required by the hearer. Variation in the use of the definite article is often related to how a given language maps this transition from indefinite to definite onto the identifiability scale.\textsuperscript{13} It should be no surprise that the "storytelling" and frame-based uses of the definite article in Biblical Hebrew fall in this middle range of partial identifiability.

As described by the grammars, Barr's "storytelling" use seems to be related to referentiality. Not all noun phrases represent discourse referents, and at the low end of the identifiability scale, many scholars have noted a distinction between referential and non-referential expressions. In most languages, referentials fall within the indefinite range, and it has long been noted that English indefinites are ambiguous in regard to referentiality. For instance, Hopper and Thompson give example 7:\textsuperscript{14}

(7) Celia wants to watch a ballet dancer.

Here, the speaker may have a specific dancer in mind, or it may be that Celia does not care who exactly she sees, any dancer will do. The difference is that only a referential expression may persist as a discourse referent, and in fact, subsequent reference with an anaphoric pronoun provides a test for referentiality:

(8) \begin{itemize}
  \item a. Celia wants to watch a ballet dancer. They are graceful.
  \item b. Celia wants to watch a ballet dancer. She is in town with the Moscow Ballet.
\end{itemize}

In sentence 8a, the noun phrase is non-referential. Note how the pronoun they in the following sentence switches to generic reference, making a characterizing statement about ballet dancers in


\textsuperscript{14} Paul Hopper and Sandra Thompson, “Transitivity in Grammar and Discourse,” \textit{Language} 56 (1980): 256.
general. In contrast, the indefinite noun phrase in 8b is interpreted as referential since the
subsequent pronoun *she* must refer to a specific discourse referent—a *ballet dancer*.

English has a determiner specifically reserved for a referential indefinite reading—the indefinite
*this*—which Gundel, Hedberg, and Zacharski locate on their identifiability scale between type
identifiable and uniquely identifiable as in 9:

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{Uniquely Identifiable} & > & \text{Referential} > \text{Type Identifiable} \\
\text{English} & \text{the NP} & \text{indefinite *this* NP} & \text{a NP} \\
\text{definite} & \text{indefinite} & & \\
\end{array}
\]

Thus, in example 10 the use of *this* instead of *a* forces a referential reading:

(10) Celia wants to watch **this ballet dancer**.

Many languages have also developed interesting circumlocutions for this lower range of
identifiability. For instance, languages with an object marker, such as the preposition *a* in
Spanish, have a means to distinguish referential indefinites when they occur as the object of a
verb by adding this marker as in example 11:

(11) Celia quiere mirar **a un bailarín**.

Celia wants to see **a ballet dancer** [referential].

In the cases above, the distinction of referential from non-referential fell within the indefinite
range, but there are also languages in which referential readings seem to be grouped with the low
end of the definite range. For instance, Lyons notes that in Sango—spoken in the Central Africa
Republic—the post-nominal particle *ní* seems to combine the definite and referential readings in

15. Gundel, et al., 284, see Table 1.
16. Lambrecht, 84.
17. This phenomenon has been termed Differential Object Marking (DOM) by Georg Bossong and refers to
languages in which only a certain set of objects are overtly marked. For summaries, see Georg Bossong, *Empirische
Universalienforschung: Differentielle Objektmarkierung in Den Neuiranischen Sprachen*, Tübingen: Narr, 1985,
vary in regard to which parameters affect marking, but most commonly it is a combination of animacy and
definiteness. Biblical Hebrew, of course, is a DOM language using the particle נִק, but unlike Spanish only
grammatically definite objects are marked thus no distinction is made between referential and non-referential
indefinites.
contrast to a bare non-referential indefinite:¹⁸

(12)  | Uniquely Identifiable > Referential > | Type Identifiable
  Sango | ........................................................................... | NP $\emptyset$
  ................... | NP $nî$ |
  definite | | indefinite

This is how the grammars, including Barr’s “storytelling” explanation, seem to be interpreting some of the peculiar examples of the Biblical Hebrew definite article—the definite article may sometimes be used to force a referential reading for a referent that would otherwise be considered indefinite by creating an expectation of identifiability.

The question is why such a distinction would be important. Many researchers have found that in English, referents introduced with indefinite this are more likely to persist in subsequent sentences than those introduced with a.¹⁹ For instance, Givon and Wright found in a text study that about 67% of referents introduced with indefinite this persisted past 2 clauses, compared to only about 7% of those marked with the indefinite article a.²⁰ Thus in general, while they have the potential to persist as discourse referents, things introduced with indefinite noun phrases tend not to be important to the discourse as a whole. The purpose of forcing a referential reading would be to generate an expectation of subsequent reference.

While the "storytelling" use seems related to referentiality and lies right at the border of definite and indefinite, the frame-based use falls squarely within the definite range which seems to be the more complex of the two. Ellen Prince has captured this gradation in a four-part scale similar to 13:²¹

(13)  | Evoked > Unused > Inferrable > | New
  ................... | | |
  definite | | indefinite

Returning to example 1, in Prince's terms, when first mentioned the indefinite phrase יָשָׁה a woman is considered New since the referent is unidentifiable. Once mentioned, however, a discourse referent is created which has Evoked status and can be referenced with the definite

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¹⁸. Lyons, 59-60.
¹⁹. Gundel, et al., 277 n.3.
noun phrase the woman. Referents such as the sun are termed unused, suggesting that a referent exists in the hearer's memory, but has not yet been grounded in the discourse world.

At the bottom of the definite range is the inferrable category. Prince defines a referent as inferrable if it can be deduced through logical or plausible reasoning based on other referents or the situation. For instance, a discourse such as 14 is awkward because it seems likely that the speaker can assume that the hearer knows that books have covers, violating Grice's Maxim of Quantity and making the second sentence redundant.

(14) I bought a book yesterday. The book had a cover. The cover was torn.

A more efficient discourse would be 15:

(15) I bought a book yesterday. The cover was torn.

This use of the definite article can also be called frame-based reference. The idea of a semantic frame was introduced by Charles Fillmore and is used to describe the set of general knowledge that can be connected to a particular entity or situation. Fillmore's famous example is a commercial transaction which includes among others the buyer, the seller, the product, and the price. Often the members of a frame are joined by a part-whole or possessor-possessed relationship; therefore, the frame of a book includes things such as the cover, the pages, the title, and the author. Thus, as van Wolde has suggested, words can be seen as the "tips of encyclopedic icebergs." A word does not only signify the referent itself, but it also invokes a vast network of connected ideas which are involved in creating meaning.

Frames impact identifiability by limiting the set of referents from which the hearer must choose. Like the case of a woman, the members of the frame are only identifiable as types, not individuals, but because they are grounded to a particular discourse referent they are higher in individuation and identifiability. Thus, like the case of the sun they can be accessed

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22. Ibid, 236.
23. Marilyn Walker and Ellen Prince, “A Bilateral Approach to Givenness: A Hearer-Status Algorithm and a Centering Algorithm,” in Reference and Referent Accessibility (Ed. Thorstein Fretheim and Jeanette K. Gundel; Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1996), 293. In short, Grice's Maxim of Quantity states that a speaker should give as much information as needed, but not more information than is required.
directly by a definite noun phrase. As reflected by Prince's scale, in terms of identifiability, they sit somewhere in between the New and Unused categories. Note, however, that within this range, the identifiability of a particular referent is also affected by the strength of the relationship between the inferred member and the entity or situation that invoked the frame.\(^{27}\)

Many of the examples listed in GKC §126\(q\) are best explained as frame-based reference. This is illustrated well by example 2 mentioned earlier from Genesis 22:6:

\[
\text{(2)} \text{וַיִּקַּ֣ח בְּיָד֔וֹ אֶת־הָאֵ֖שׁ וְאֶת־הַֽמַּאֲכֶ֑לֶת} \quad \text{Gn 22:6b}
\]

Then he took in his hand the fire and the knife.

Here, the use of the article with אֶשׁ and המַאֲכֶלֶת clearly relates to the introduction of a frame. In fact, the previous sentence explicitly connected the wood to a burnt offering or עֹלָה:

\[
\text{(16)} \text{וַיִּקַּ֨ח אַבְרָהָ֜ם אֶת־עֲצֵ֣י הָעֹלָ֗ה} \quad \text{Gn 22:6a}
\]

Then Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering...

Further, in the following verse Isaac exclaims:

\[
\text{(17)} \text{הִנֵּ֤ה הָאֵשׁ וְהָ֣עֵצִ֔ים וְאַיֵ֥ה הַשֶּׂ֖ה לְעֹלָֽה} \quad \text{Gn 22:7}
\]

Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for a burnt offering?

Isaac has obviously recognized the frame for an עֹלָה, and in fact this is an important literary device in the story. Here, the use of a definite noun phrase to introduce the knife is uncomfortable to English speakers who are not familiar with the frame of an עֹלָה, and in fact the KJV translates the phrase with the indefinite a knife. In cases where the frame is familiar to English speakers, however, the definite article is often used in English as in the earlier example from Gn 37:31:

\[
\text{(5)} \text{וַֽיִּשְׁחֲדוּ שְׂעִיר עִזִּ֔ים וַיִּטְבְּל֥וּ אֶת־הַכֻּתֹּ֖נֶת בַּדָּֽם} \quad \text{Gn 37:31}
\]

Then they slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood

Thus, if the grammars are correct in their analysis, the "storytelling" use of the article would indeed be peculiar to Hebrew, but the differences between Hebrew and English in the frame-based use has more to do with cultural distance than the function of the article. The building of

\(^{27}\) Gundel et al., 281.
frames is an aspect of how we categorize the world, but this process is conditioned by our personal experience. Thus, what is interesting about frame-based reference is that, to the extent that we can isolate them, these examples provide an interesting window into the cognitive processes of ancient speakers.

This can be illustrated by example 4, which came from the Joseph story in Gn 42:23:

(4) וְהֵם לֹ֣א יָֽדְעُוּ כִּי שֹׁמֵ֖עַ יוֹסֵ֑ף כִּ֥י הַמֵּלִ֖יץ בֵּינֹֽתָם

But they did not know that Joseph understood them because an interpreter was between them.

Here, the definite article here seems to be related to frame-based reference rather than the storytelling use, and as noted earlier the noun phrase is generally translated as an interpreter. The naturalness of the indefinite article, however, is due to the standard English speaker's lack of familiarity with the frame of an ancient royal court—specifically that an international court would contain an interpreter. In contrast, were the setting a UN conference, it would be quite natural in English to refer to the interpreter. This is the sort of extra-linguistic knowledge lying below the surface that helps make language meaningful.

The cultural distance, however, can also make it difficult in some cases to determine the exact nature of the frame. For instance, in Gn 18:7, Barr suggests that the definite article is used with הנער because we can assume Abraham would have a servant present with him:

(18) וַיִּקַּ֨ח בֶּן־בָּקָ֜ר וָטוֹב֙ וַיִּתֵּ֣ן אֶל־הַנַּ֔עַר

And he (Abraham) took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a servant.

However, in the Aqedah story, Abraham specifically takes two of his lads, suggesting that he would have a group from which to choose:

(19) וַיִּקַּ֞ח אֶת־שְׁנֵ֤י נְעָרָיו֙ אִתּ֔וֹ

And he took two of his servants with him.

Thus the general frame of Abraham's household would seem to include a set of נערים who would normally be identifiable only as a group. To identify a particular servant would require more knowledge, which is not immediately evident to a modern speaker. It may be that Abraham would have a personal servant, that he would usually be accompanied by only a single servant on tasks, or it could be that mention of the calf also invokes a frame, further limiting the set of
ןְעָרִים. Compare, for instance, example 20:

(20) I put your shirt in the closet.

Although a house contains several closets, the closet is identifiable as the bedroom closet because for a standard English speaker the frame invoked by your shirt limits the set to the bedroom.

In conclusion, the variant uses of the definite article in Biblical Hebrew should be divided into at least two categories. The "storytelling" use is peculiar to Hebrew and is used to force a referential reading for an expression that would otherwise be considered indefinite. Since indefinite noun phrases seldom persist as discourse referents, this creates expectation of subsequent reference, functioning similarly to English indefinite this. In contrast, the frame-based use of the article is quite common cross-linguistically and depends on the ability of a hearer to identify a referent based on its membership in a semantic frame. Here, differences between English and Hebrew are not related to the function of the article, but the cultural distance between speakers. Thus the frame-based use illustrates the link between language and experience, sometimes providing an interesting insight into the cognitive world of ancient speakers.
7. Bibliography


