

Definite articles and geographical proper names: The case of river names

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The use of definite determiners with geographical proper names greatly varies both within languages and across language groups. City names usually reject the determiner in all Romance and Germanic languages (1); country names behave similarly in most Germanic languages, vary according to gender in German and obligatorily take the article in Romance (2); river names take an article in all Romance and Germanic languages (with prenominal definite articles) (3).

- (1) *(*le*) *Paris* (Fr.) ...; *(*the*) *London* (En.) ...
- (2) *(*l*) *Italia* (It.) ...; *(*das*) *Deutschland*, *(*die*) *Schweiz*, (*der*) *Irak* (Ge)
- (3) *(*el*) *Duero* (Sp.) ...; *(*de*) *Maas* (Du.), ...

In our presentation, we will show that the use of the definite article varies with its morphological complexity. In German, the definite article expresses definiteness, gender, number and case. Each one of these features may trigger the occurrence of the article. This is what happens in (2) (Ge), where gender – and crucially not definiteness – is the relevant feature. The exact variation in German can be captured under a feature-geometric approach where neuter is unmarked, masculine is underspecified and feminine is fully specified for gender. By contrast, the definite article in Romance (2), where no masculine-feminine gender contrasts are observed, is not triggered by gender, but rather by the syntactic and semantic conditions bearing on empty D heads in Romance.

The fact that the definite article occurs in all Romance and Germanic languages with river names strongly suggests that its appearance is directly linked to the definiteness feature itself. Other features such as gender, number and case can immediately be discarded, since the English definite article has no marking for these features and still appears with river names. The conditions governing the appearance of the definite article with Romance country names are equally irrelevant, since such conditions would wrongly predict a contrast between Romance and Germanic languages.

It thus seems that river names are genuinely more like common names, and we will show that contrary to most other geographical names, they are not rigid designators. This assumption is supported by the different interpretation of Amazon in (4): in (4a) reference is made to the length of the course of the river, while in (4b) the water referred to does not even lay within its course.

- (4) a. *The Amazon is 6.992 km long.* b. *The Amazon colors the Atlantic grey.*

This kind of referential vagueness distinguishes river names from country or city names and sets them on a par with common names.