

On the Historical Development of English Articles

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1. Introduction

Some languages have articles, and others do not have any articles. There are differences in the determiner system between English and Japanese. Compare the following examples.

- (1)(a) Wagahai wa **neko** de aru. (Natsume (1999))
(b) I am **a cat**. (Ito and Wilson (2002: 1))

The example in (1a) is a Japanese sentence, and the other example in (1b) is its English translation. Let us focus on the boldfaced noun phrases in both examples. The nominal *neko* in (1a) is not preceded by any article, whereas *cat* in (1b) is preceded by the article *a*. Thus, Japanese nominals do not require articles, but English nominals require articles.

However, the article was not provided in earlier English. In Modern English, articles are necessary, but in Old English they were not always necessary. Consider the following examples.

- (2)(a) Ne leue na mon **ancre** þe let in monnes ehe to schawin hire seoluen.
(b) Let no one trust **the anchoress** who lets in a man's eye and shows herself. (Farina (2016: 41))

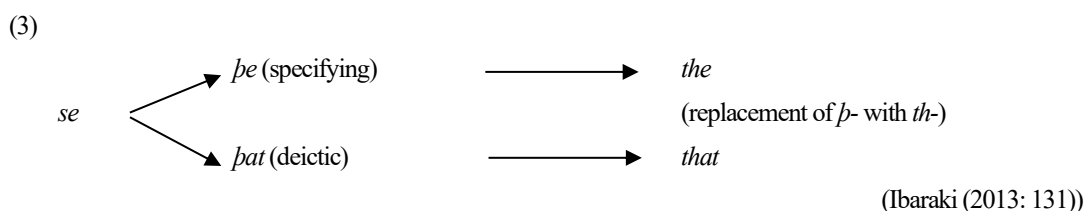
The example in (2a) is an Old English sentence, and (2b) is its Modern English translation. In both examples, let us focus on the bold noun phrases. The noun *ancre* in (2a) does not have any article, but *anchoress* in (2b) is accompanied with the definite article *the*. Thus, the article was not a necessary item in earlier English where Present-day English would require the determiner. If so, why is the article necessary in Present-day English? How has it developed in the history of English? So, the aim of this paper is to clarify the reason why the definite and indefinite articles have evolved and been established in the determiner system of Present-day English.

The organization of this article is as follows. In section 2, we will examine the previous analyses concerning the historical development of English articles. In section 3, the functions of demonstratives and articles will be considered within the framework of Cognitive Grammar, and through the comparison between the functions of demonstratives and those of articles the historical development of English articles will be clarified. Section 4 deals with the functional elements of Present-day English and sheds light on their common characteristics which reflect the whole system of the language. Section 5 is the conclusion of the whole discussion.

2. Previous Studies

2.1. Generative Approach

Following the theory of grammaticalization (Hopper and Traugott (2003), Gelderen (2004), etc.) and the framework of Minimalist Syntax (Chomsky (2000)), Ibaraki (2013) discusses the historical development of the definite article in English from the three viewpoints: (i) the period when the definite article emerged and came to be established, (ii) the structural position of demonstratives in Old English, and (iii) the diachronic development process of the definite article. Adopting the ideas of Hopper and Traugott (2003), Ibaraki (2003) shows that the definite article has developed from the Old English determiner *se* through the processes of divergence and bleaching, as in (3).



As illustrated in (3), Ibaraki (2013) assumes that the nominative singular masculine demonstrative *se* in Old English diverged into the definite article *the* and the demonstrative *that* in Present-day English. The Old English demonstrative *se*, which was inflected according to gender, number and case, developed into the definite article *þe* which had the function of specifying. On the other hand, it also developed into the demonstrative *þat* whose function was deictic. Ibaraki (2013: 131) adopts the assertion by Hopper and Traugott (2003) that the historical change of the demonstrative into the definite article in English is regarded as a case of divergence and semantic bleaching.

Hopper and Traugott (2003: 118) explain the characteristic of divergence as follows: “when a lexical form undergoes grammaticalization to a clitic or affix, the original lexical form may remain as an autonomous element and undergo the same changes as ordinary lexical item.” According to Hopper and Traugott (2003: 119), the development of the indefinite article *a/an* can be considered as the process of divergence. The lexical item *an*¹ in OE meant “one, a certain,” which is almost the same as numeral *one* in PE. The indefinite article in PE can be used in the general-nonspecific sense, as in (4a), but OE *an* was not allowed for this usage. OE *an* was “used to ‘present’ new items,” as in (4b).

(4)(a) I caught a fish.

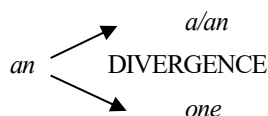
¹ The word *an* in OE is different from PE (i.e., Present-day English) indefinite article in form and pronunciation. It did not have the form *a* but had only the form *an*, which was pronounced as a long low back vowel.

(b) There was once a prince of Tuscany.

(Hopper and Traugott (2003: 119))

Thus, OE *an* diverged into the indefinite article *a/an* in PE on the one hand and the independent numeral *one* in PE on the other, as illustrated in (5).

(5)



(Ibaraki (2013: 132))

As for OE demonstrative *se*, the same form was retained for a long time, and through the process in (3) above, *þe* changed into the definite article. The original *se* changed its form to *þat* as a new demonstrative.

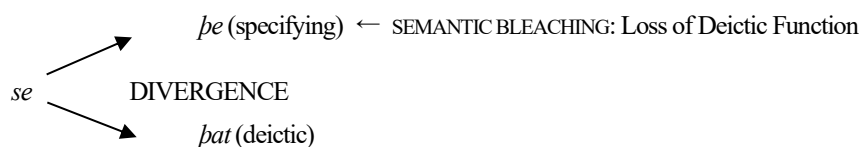
Then, Ibaraki (2013) turns to the other aspect of divergence, i.e., bleaching or semantic weakening. He assumes that the definite article changed from a grammatical word (a function word) to a clitic in accordance with the general process, as in the following.

(6) content item > grammatical word > clitic > inflectional affix

(Hopper and Traugott (2003: 7))

The differences between the demonstrative and the definite article are in the presence or absence of deictic function. The former has deictic function but the latter does not. In addition to the figure in (3), in which the original function of OE demonstrative *se* was divided into the function of specifying and that of deixis, Ibaraki (2013) adds the process of semantic bleaching, as in (7).

(7)



(Ibaraki (2013: 132))

As illustrated in (3), the original demonstrative *se* diverged into *þat* and *þe*. Following Hopper and Traugott (2003), he assumes that the process of grammaticalization involves semantic weakening. The function of the

demonstrative *þat* is deictic, while that of definite article *þe* lost its deictic function. Since the deictic function involves the semantic constraint of spatial distance (proximal/distal contrast²), the referential function of the definite article is weaker than that of the demonstrative in terms of semantic constraints. Thus, Ibaraki (2013) considers that the development of the definite article involves the semantic bleaching, the loss of deictic function. However, this analysis does not discuss what remains in the definite article after it has been bleached. If the OE demonstrative *se* was divided into two items and one inherited the basic function of the original, is not the other acquire a new function? Thus, in the next subsection we will discuss the characteristics of PE definite article proposed in previous studies.

2.2. Characterizing Definiteness

The characteristics of the definite article in PE have been examined. In this subsection, let us consider representative proposals following Lyons (1999). The first proposal to be discussed is the familiarity hypothesis. Let us start our discussion with the comparison of the following examples.

(8)(a) I bought **a car** this morning.

(b) I bought **the car** this morning.

(Lyons (1999: 2))

The car in (8b) is more “definite”, “specific”, “individualized” etc. than *a car* in (8a). However, the referent of the latter certainly denotes a particular or specific car. At this point, remember the suggestion in (3), in which Ibaraki (2013) describes the function of definite article as specifying. But specificity should be involved not only in the definite article but also in the indefinite article, although the degree of specificity may be different in some way. Therefore, specifying seems to be not appropriate for the functions of the definite and indefinite articles. Hence, the familiarity hypothesis was proposed by Christophersen (1939) and Hawkins (2017) among others. According to the familiarity hypothesis, the hearer is familiar with the car in (8b) but not in (8a). So, the difference in meaning and function between the definite and indefinite articles might be explained. However, we can find the examples which cannot be accounted for by this hypothesis. Look at the following examples.

(9)(a) Just give **the shelf** a quick wipe, will you, before I put this vase on it.

(b) Put these clean towels in **the bathroom** please.

(c) I hear **the prime minister** behaved outrageously again today.

(Lyons (1999: 3))

² The contrast, proximal/distal, is referred to in Langacker (1991: 245), in which the spatial distance is regarded as epistemic distance.

The examples in (9a-c) are used in specific situations. For example, the hearer can identify the shelf, but the existence of the shelf may not have been familiar not only to the hearer but also to the speaker. The present situation may contribute to the familiarity of the shelf. In the case of (9c), the speaker may get the news but not know the person concerned personally.

Next, consider the following sentence.

(10) **The moon** was very bright last night.

(Lyons (1999: 3))

This is also regarded as a situational use, but the familiarity with the moon is based on the general astronomical knowledge of the planet with a single satellite.

Another type of use can be observed in the following example.

(11) An elegant, dark-haired woman, a well-dressed man with dark glasses, and two children entered the compartment. I immediately recognized **the woman**. **The children** also looked vaguely familiar.

(Lyons (1999: 3))

In (11), the use of the definite article is anaphoric. The speaker is familiar with the woman and the children from the context. In the previous situation the speaker may have noticed the woman and the children.

Now consider the following examples.

(12)(a) I had to get a taxi from the station. On the way **the driver** told me there was a bus strike.

(b) They've just got in from New York. **The plane** was five hours late.

(Lyons (1999: 3))

The examples in (12a, b) are said to be bridging cross-reference or associative use. In (12a), the driver is not mentioned in the first sentence, but the mention of the taxi evokes its driver. In other words, the vehicle is associated with its driver. In (12b), the existence of the plane is not mentioned in the first sentence, but the distance between New York and the place where the speaker is makes the mental association with an aircraft.

Lyons (1999) cites other examples, as in the following:

(13) **The president of Ghana** is visiting tomorrow.

(14) **The bloke Ann went out with last night** phoned a minute ago.

(Lyons (1999: 3))

In (13), the speaker may not know the president personally, but may give such a description from the knowledge of the world that there is a person who has the highest position in that country. In contrast, another reading is possible. The use of the definite article may be caused by adding the prepositional phrase as a modifier. This interpretation also applies to the example in (14). The familiarity of *the bloke* is dependent on the following relative clause.

Finally, consider the following examples.

(15)(a) **The fact that you've known them for years** is no excuse.

(b) We were rather worried by **the prospect of having to cook for six for two weeks**.

(Lyons (1999: 3))

The use of the definite article in the bold expressions in (15a, b) is caused by the complement clause *that you've known them for years* and the complement gerundive phrase *having to cook for six for two weeks*. These complements act in essence as “antecedent” for *the fact* and *the prospect*, which are regarded as cataphoric uses.

These notions might be available for the meaning or function of the definite article, but it seems to be problematic in stating that the meaning of a single element is defined by using multiple notions. Furthermore, it seems to be inadequate to adopt lexical concepts for the definition of grammatical elements. Thus, in the next section, we will adopt the viewpoint of Cognitive Grammar and apply the analysis to the historical development of English articles.

3. Functions of the Definiteness and Indefiniteness

3.1. Functions of the Demonstratives

Ibaraki (2013) argues that OE demonstrative *se* is bleached and transformed into *þe*, but does not clarify what functions are acquired in the bleached *þe*. In order to show the characteristics of the definite article, we first examine the functions of the demonstratives, and then consider the functions of articles from the viewpoint of Cognitive Grammar.

Langacker (2008: 260) argues that grounding reflects the asymmetry between the subject and the object³ of conception, that is, between the conceptualizer and the conceptualized. The ground is the place consisting of the speech event itself, the speaker/hearer, the interaction between the participants, and the immediate circumstances (in particular, the time and place of speaking), and grounding is the semantic function of linking the concepts represented by linguistic expressions to the ground. A lexical noun or verb is a categorical item shared by a

³ The subject and object of conception are different from subject and object of the clause construction. The speaker and hearer are the principal subjects of conception. For details, refer to Langacker (2008: 260).

community and represents a concept as a type. When referring to instances in a discourse, the type conception must be linked to the world. It is only by grounding the nominal referent that it becomes possible to select individual entities concerned. The morpheme that carries out the grounding function is called the grounding element. For example, in *this piece*, *piece* represents the concept of the type of thing, and the grounding element *this* indicates the relationship between the intended instance of the type and the ground.

Grounding makes it possible for the speaker to select the object to which he or she wants to refer in the discourse and to direct the hearer’s attention to the intended entity. Consider the following example in (12).

(16) I want **this** [→] piece.

(Langacker (2008: 281))

The situation in (16) is as follows: the speaker directs the listener’s attention to the specific cake in a cake shop with an utterance such as (16) accompanied by a physical pointing gesture, which is indicated by the arrow in brackets. Thus, the function of demonstrative *this* is for the speaker to direct the hearer's attention to a specific referent that is physically present within the area proximal to the ground, while that of demonstrative *that* is to do so to a specific referent that is physically present within the region distal to the ground. The common function of the proximal and distal demonstratives is to direct the hearer’s attention to a specific referent from the ground. However, the distance relation between the referent and the ground is likely to be changeable according to the continuing discourse. Langacker (2008) explains that the progression of the discourse is represented by the components of the current discourse space (CDS), as shown in figure 1.

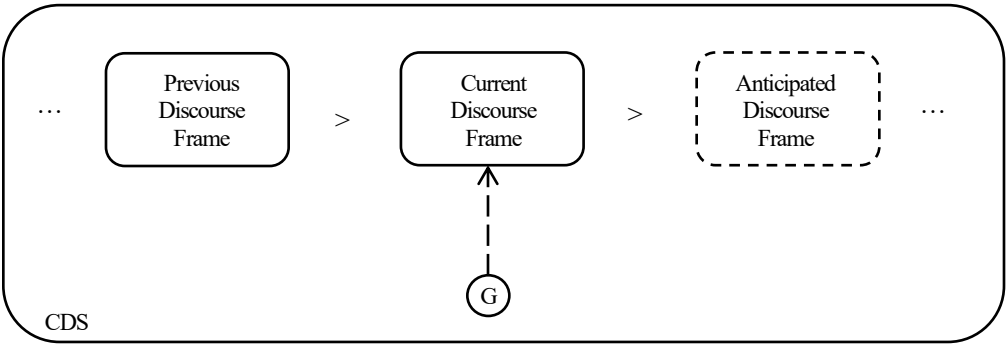


Figure 1

(Langacker (2008: 282))

As the discourse progresses, the CDS is continuously updated as each successive utterance is processed. At any

point in time, the CDS becomes the basis for interpreting the next utterance encountered, changing both the content of the CDS and the content focused on within the CDS. Thus, as the discourse unfolds, the interlocutors negotiate a series of discourse frames, each of which is produced by updating the previous one. Moreover, the discourse role of the grounding element is the act of identifying a nominal referent within the current discourse frame.

In the case of demonstratives, there is a proximity/distance distinction, but importantly, the distance in question need not be a spatial one. Proximity can be spatial, temporal, functional, attitudinal, or a combination of these. In addition, all demonstratives can be used with pointing gestures. Figure 2⁴ shows the pointing use of *this*.

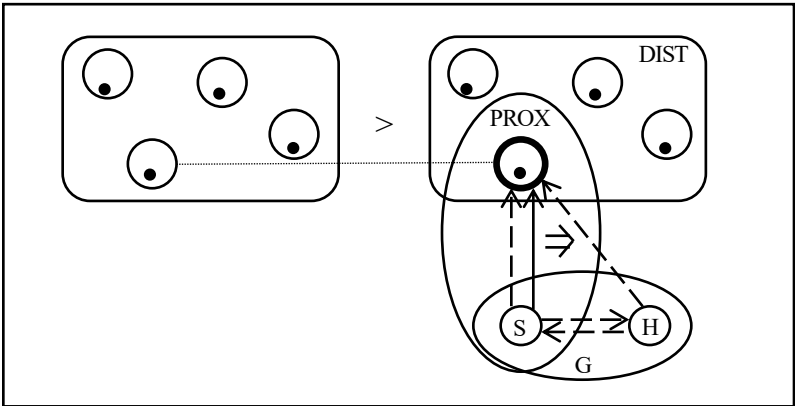


Figure 2

(Langacker (2008: 283))

The demonstrative assumes a range of possible targets that are visually accessible from the ground and are represented within the present discourse frame. The speaker singles out the specific entity, which is represented by a thick circle, by using the demonstrative and the physical pointing gesture, which is represented by a solid arrow. The double arrow indicates the directive force of the gesture. The target entity is within an ellipse, which indicates the proximal area. The other ellipse represents the ground, in which the participants are interacting with each other at the time of speaking. As for the distal demonstrative *that*, the target entity is in the distant area.

Now consider the following example.

(17) We've started a **major research project**. The goal of **this project** is to prove the existence of phlogiston.

(Langacker (2008: 281))

⁴ The nominal referents are represented by a circle including a dot. The detailed explanation is omitted in order to retain the flow of discussion. For details, see Langacker (2008: 268, 283).

with a type specification: the demonstratives can be used alone as nominals, whereas the definite article must be combined with noun to form a nominal⁵. In contrast to demonstratives, the definite article does not single out the referent by itself. Moreover, demonstratives can be anaphoric, but the definite article does not rely on the previous discourse frame, although the definite noun phrase can be used anaphorically as illustrated in (11) and (12) above. The use of the definite article focuses only one eligible candidate (only one instance of the specified type) within the relevant scope of consideration. The type of the candidate is not specified by the definite article but by an elaborated description which follows the article. It is not necessary to distinguish it from other entities by a physical pointing gesture or a linguistic expression. Furthermore, it is necessary to go back to the preceding discourse frame to identify the instance, as in figure 4.⁶

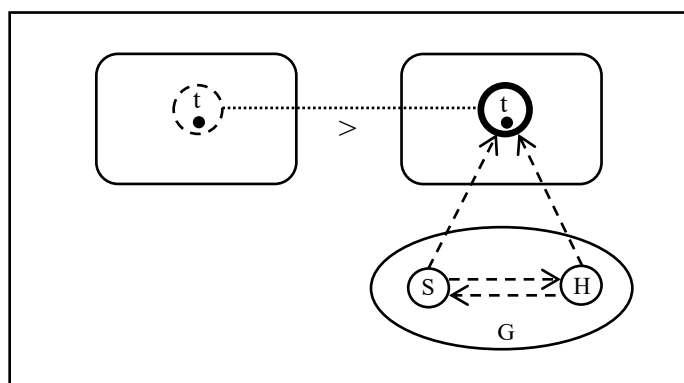


Figure 4

(Langacker (2008: 285))

As illustrated in figure 4, the interlocutors direct their attention only to the entity within the present discourse frame. Thus, the definite article is used when it is possible for the speaker and/or the hearer to establish their identification of the referent within the present situation. The definite article can be used even if the referent entity is not present in the preceding discourse frame, as in (6).

(18)(a) **The air conditioner** just went off.

(b) She has a computer, but **the modem** isn't working.

(c) **the best way** to skin a cat; **the only person** to have hit a golf ball on the moon

(d) **the month** between April and June; **the nation** that shares a border with Canada

(Langacker (2008: 286))

⁵ The treatment of the structure of nominal expressions in Cognitive Grammar is different from the Generative approach. “DP (= Determiner Phrase)” and “NP (= Noun Phrase)” in the DP hypothesis of Generative Grammar correspond to “nominal” and “noun” in Cognitive Grammar respectively.

⁶ The alphabet *t* in a circle indicates a simple type specification. For details, see Langacker (2008: 277).

In (18a), the interlocutors were not probably conscious of the air conditioner before it went off. The first clause in (18b) does not invoke a modem, although the parts of the computer might be recognized. In (18c), the entities are singled out through the use of the superlative and the expression *only* within the present discourse frame. In (18d), the entities represented by the definite expressions are unique candidates because of the modifiers.

Comparing the demonstratives and the definite article from the above arguments, we see that the demonstratives have the proximal/distal distinction, while the definite article does not. This can be seen from the examples in (19).

(19)(a) ***The cat** is friendlier than **the cat**.

(b) **This cat** is friendlier than **that cat**.

(Langacker (1991: 102))

The reason why (19a) is ungrammatical is that it is not possible to distinguish between the former and the latter, and to identify each cat. The lack of distinction between the former and the latter does not preserve the uniqueness of the type, since we cannot tell which cat corresponds to which by referring to the preceding discourse frame. In (19b), on the other hand, the use of two types of demonstratives, *this* and *that*, makes it possible to distinguish between the two cats, which are separated by a distance. This means that the change from the demonstratives to the definite article eliminates the proximal/distal distinction.

It also shows that, as in (20), the demonstratives need to identify what they refer to, but the definite article does not necessarily have to do so.

(20)(a) Don't go in there, chum. **The dog** will bite you.

(b) Don't go in there, chum. **This/That dog** will bite you.

(Hawkins (2017: 103))

In (20a), the dog does not actually have to be visible to the hearer at the time of speaking, but *the dog* can be used to warn of its presence. The speaker does not need to mention the specific entity, as he or she is only warning the hearer that there is *the dog* in the place he or she is about to enter. However, in (20b), the speaker has to refer to which dog he or she is indicating in terms of the distance between the speaker and the dog.

The above suggests that when the demonstrative changed into the definite article, it came to be bleached and lost its demonstrative force, but the definite article still exists with the function of marking the definiteness of the type acquired. According to Langacker (2008), the function of the definite article is called grounding. However,

grounding is not limited to the definite article. The indefinite article has this function.⁷ Then, what is this grounding function and how is this established in English? The features are common to all the functional items in PE. We will see this in the next section.

4. Characteristics of Functional Elements in English

As we have seen in section 2, the definite article developed from OE demonstrative through semantic bleaching. This historical change is not limited to the articles, but is related to the whole system of PE. It is generally assumed that the historical change is from synthesis to analysis. Analytic languages show their grammatical functions by inflections, while analytic languages use specific grammatical words or particles rather than inflection. Through the process of leveling of inflection, English came to develop grammatical words such as modals, periphrastic *do*, copular *be*, infinitival *to* and *for*, complementizer or relative *that*, existential *there*, preparatory *it*, and grammatical morphemes such as tense elements, *-ing*, *-s*, and so on. Moreover, word order plays an important role.

Especially, the representation of grammatical functions relies on markedness. Compare the following pairs.

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| (21)(a) We walk every evening. | [walk + <i>Present</i> = walk + \varnothing] |
| (b) We walked every evening. | [walk + <i>Past</i> = walk + -ed] |
| (22)(a) They may like it. | [may + <i>Present</i> = may + \varnothing] |
| (b) They might like it. | [may + <i>Past</i> = may + -ed] |

In (21), the distinction between present tense and past tense is the absence or presence of past tense affix *-ed*. In other words, the present tense is marked by zero affix \varnothing , i.e., unmarked, whereas the past tense is represented by adding the past tense marker. In (22), the absence or presence of a modal represents reality or irrealis⁸. That is, the absence or presence of a grammatical marker reflects differences in grammatical function. Past tense marker *-ed* indicates epistemic distance. Thus, the contrast of between the absence and presence of the past tense morpheme signals the conceptual opposition, proximal/distal contrast (Langacker (1991: 245)).

We can see other sample sentences, as in (23).

- (23)(a) The forecast says **that** it is going to rain.
 (b) The forecast says it's going to rain.

(Bolinger (1977: 11))

⁷ The elements which have nominal grounding include not only the definite and indefinite articles but also the proximal/distal demonstratives and quantifiers. For details, refer to Langacker (2008: 259).

⁸ Irrealis indicates "unknown reality" and "non-reality." For more detail, refer to Langacker (1991: 242, 244) and Langacker (2008: 301, 306)

In (23), the presence or absence of complementizer *that* signals whether the situation described in a complement clause is related to the previous context or not. Here again, the epistemic difference is related to the markedness of the complementizer.

Now, let us see the examples containing the indefinite article and the definite article discussed in (8), repeated here as (24).

- (24)(a) I bought *a car* this morning.
(b) I bought *the car* this morning.

(Lyons (1999: 2))

In (24), it might appear that the contrast between indefiniteness and definiteness is the use of the indefinite marker *a* or the definiteness marker *the*. However, in this case the markedness seems to be appropriate for the explanation of their functions. Look at the following examples.

- (25)(a) the cars
(b) cars
(26)(a) the coffee
(b) coffee
(27)(a) a car
(b) cars

In both (25) and (26), in which a count noun and a mass noun appears respectively, the contrast between definiteness and indefiniteness seems to be represented by the presence or absence of the definiteness marker *the*. In (27), the presence or absence of the indefinite article seems to reflect the opposition between singular and plural in indefinite expressions. If this line of argument is on the right track, the divergence phenomenon of the definite article in (3) and those of the indefinite article in (5) are different types of grammaticalization. We have seen that the English grammatical items show their functions by the contrast between marked and unmarked, and thus their historical developments reflect the epistemic distance of the speaker. The epistemic distance is almost equal to the contrast between bounded and unbounded. The word “definite” is divided into intensive prefix *de-* and the stem, whose origin is Latin *finire* meaning “to bound, limit”. Thus, the function of definiteness is regarded as indicating boundedness. The opposition between finite and nonfinite in clauses is another representation of boundedness.

5. Conclusion

In this study, we have tried to clarify the reason why the definite and indefinite articles have evolved and been established in the determiner system of Present-day English. Old English was a synthetic language to some

extent⁹, but through the historical development it has changed into an analytic language gradually. The general tendency of the historical change in the English language is toward weakening semantic contents and developing new systematic grammatical functions: that is, cognitive and epistemic contrast between boundedness and unboundedness. The original demonstrative *se* and numeral *an* had referential functions, which were rather lexical since they could refer to entities in the world. Each of them retained their original functions and thus came to be used as the demonstrative *that* and numeral *one* in the PE system, while each concurrently diverged and has developed to be established as a new grammatical element.

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⁹ Even during the OE period, the process from synthesis to analysis occurred to some extent but the change was caused within the Germanic languages. However, since the Middle English period the change was drastic and dynamic, that of OE was not so rapid and profound as the later changes.