The Morphology, Syntax and Semantics of
Definite Determiners in Swiss German*

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In Swiss German there are three paradigms for the definite determiner: a weak article, a strong article, and a proximal demonstrative. The aim of this paper is to show that these three paradigms not only differ with respect to their morphological form, but also with respect to their semantic function and their syntactic structure. Based on several Swiss German data corpora there is evidence for a strong correlation between morphology, semantics, and syntax. I will demonstrate that every paradigm has its prototypical semantic function. The weak article is used in inherently unique contexts, the strong article shows up in anaphoric contexts and the demonstrative is used in deictic contexts. However, some cases seem to challenge the correlation established in the analysis, particularly modification structures with relative clauses. However, I shall show that the use of articles in these cases follows its own strictly semantic rules. To meet the semantics syntax correlation, I put forward the idea that every paradigm has—due to its particular feature structure—its own syntactic projection. Therefore, a semantic-syntactic analysis is proposed in which the semantic-syntactic features of the three paradigms are accommodated by assuming three functional categories in the nominal phrase for the features in question, i.e. [DEF] for definiteness, [ANAPH] for anaphoricity, and [DEIKT] for deixis.

1 Introduction

Like Standard German, Swiss German dialects have a definite determiner with distinct forms marked for gender, number, and case (for details see

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section 3).1 However, Standard German has only one paradigm for the definite determiner, while some Swiss German dialects distinguish between two paradigms. These paradigms correspond to a morphologically reduced article (1a) and a morphologically full article (1b). Additionally, there exists a proximal demonstrative, which originates from the same word stem (1c).2

(1) a. de Maa d Frou s Chend
   DETRED man DETRED woman DETRED child

b. dä Maa di Frou das Chend
   DETRED man DETRED woman DETRED child

c. dää Maa die Frou daas Chend
   this man   this woman   this child

What are the semantic differences between these determiner paradigms and how can these differences be explained by syntax? The aim of this paper is to delineate the similarities and differences between the three paradigms and to explore how the similarities and differences emerge in morphology, semantics, and syntax. For this purpose, I will begin with the premise that the three paradigms not only differ in their morphological form but also in their semantic function and in their syntactic structure. I shall argue for a strong correlation between morphology, semantics, and syntax. For each paradigm, it should be

1 Abbreviations in the text: AnaphP = anaphoricity phrase, APP.RC = appositive relative clause, CP = complementizer phrase, D = determiner, DefP = definiteness phrase, DemP = demonstrative phrase, DxP = deictics phrase, DP = determiner phrase, DRC = descriptive relative clause, FinP = finiteness phrase, FN = functional noun, FP = functional phrase, IN = individual noun, NP = noun phrase, nP = little nP, REL.PRON = relative pronoun, RESTRICT.RC = restrictive relative clause, RN = relational noun, SN = sortal noun, TopP = topic phrase.


Abbreviations in the glosses: ACC = accusative, ADV = adverb, DAT = dative, f. = feminine, FULL = full (article), GEN = genitive, m. = masculine, n. = neuter, pl. = plural, ps = person, RED = reduced (article), sg. = singular.

Languages: SADS = Syntactic Atlas of the German-speaking part of Switzerland, AG = canton of Aargau, BA = canton of Basel, BE = canton of Berne, SO = canton of Solothurn.

2 Cf. Fischer (1989). The form *di* for the full feminine article is pronounced as *[di]*, the form *die* for the feminine demonstrative is pronounced as *[die]*. The reduced article is glossed with 'DETRED', the full article with 'DETFULL'. See section 3 for the full paradigms.