

Definite articles in indefinite contexts

Piotr Garbacz

University of Oslo

1. Introduction

As noted by Delsing (2003:15-19), some Swedish, Fenno-Swedish and Norwegian dialects are known for using the suffixed definite article in a number of contexts, in which such an article is ungrammatical in Standard Swedish and Norwegian. The dialects in question use the definite article in cases when the standard languages have a bare noun (i.e. noun uninflected for definiteness). The definite article can be used with mass-denoting nouns, (1a), or it can be used in predicative constructions, (1b) (both examples from Delsing 2003:16).

(1) a. Hä finns **vattne** däri hinken. (Swedish)
there is water.DEF there_in bucket.DEF
'There is water in the bucket.'

b. Hä ä **sommarn**. (Swedish)
there is summer.DEF
'It is summer.'

According to Delsing (2003:16), the use of the definite article with mass-denoting nouns (or uncountable nouns), is often considered a typical feature of the Northern Swedish dialects. It is also known from the Ostrobothnian dialects in Finland and also found in Norway (Trøndelag and parts of Nordmøre). The predicative use of the definite article is found in Northern Sweden (the provinces of Värmland, Dalarna, Medelpad, Jämtland, Ångermanland, Västerbotten, and Norrbotten), in the Fenno-Swedish dialects of Österbotten and Nyland, as well as from the now extinct Estonian Swedish (Delsing 2003). The use of the suffixed definite article in indefinite contexts is however missing in Danish, Icelandic and Faroese (ibid.).

Interestingly, the definite article can be used with nouns following indefinite quantifiers such as numerals and the equivalent of 'much' in some Northern Swedish dialects (the regions of Norrbotten, Västerbotten, Ångermanland, and Jämtland) and in the Fenno-Swedish dialects from Österbotten (Delsing 2003:17), see the examples in (2):

- (2) a. mitsi **fålke** (Swedish)

much people.DEF

‘A lot of people.’ (Överkalix, Norrbotten)

- b. två **tygpåsana** (Swedish)

two cloth_bags.DEF

‘Two cloth bags.’ (Örträsk, Västerbotten)

2. Results

2.1 Nordic Syntax Database (NSD)

The use of the suffixed definite article in indefinite contexts have been tested in the ScanDiaSyn questionnaire for Swedish and Norwegian by means of two sentences, one being an existential clause (3) and the other containing a mass-denoting noun (4).

- (3) a. Det växer **björkarna** här. (#694) (Swedish)

it grows birches.DEF here

- b. Det vokser **bjørkene** her. (#694) (Norwegian)

it grows birches.DEF here

‘There grow birches here.’

- (4) a. Hvis du er tørst er det **melka** i kjøleskapet. (#695) (Norwegian)

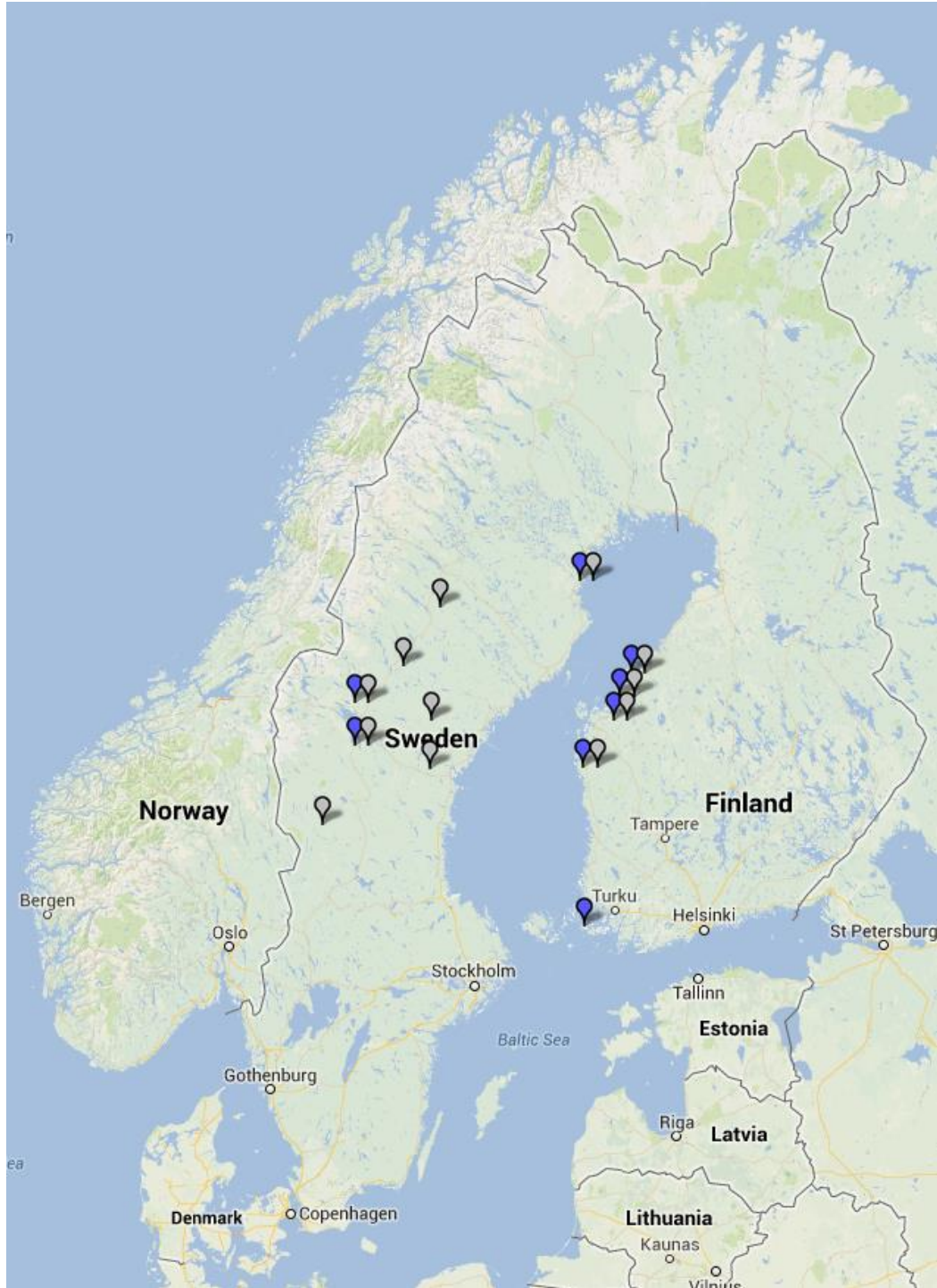
if you are thirsty is there milk.DEF in refrigerator.DEF

- b. Om du är törstig så finns det mjölken i kylskåpet. (#695) (Swedish)

if you are thirsty so is there milk.DEF in refrigerator.DEF

‘If you are thirsty there is milk in the refrigerator.’

In general, the use of the definite article in indefinite contexts is only accepted by the informants from some parts of Northern Sweden and in Finland (mainly in Österbotten). The test sentence #695 is accepted in a higher number of places compared to the sentence #694, see Map 1.



Map 1: The use of the definite article in indefinite contexts in Scandinavia (#694: *Det växer björkarna her.* 'There grow birches here'; #695: *Om du är törstig, så finns det mjölken i kylskåpet.* 'If you are thirsty, there is milk in the refrigerator').

(Blue pins represent places where sentence #694 got a high score, grey pins represent places where sentence #695 got a high score)

The use of the definite article in indefinite contexts is rejected by the Norwegian informants, with very few individual exceptions (the older informants in Vang, Oppland accept sentence #695, and the older informants in Meråker, Nord-Trøndelag accept sentence #695).

2.2 *Nordic Dialect Corpus (NDC)*

A number of examples illustrating the use of the definite article in indefinite contexts are found in the NDC. These are mostly attested in the southeastern parts of Norway, as can be seen in Map 2.



Map 2: The use of the definite article in indefinite contexts in Scandinavia, based on the NDC data (white pins represent places where such use has been found).

The examples of the use of definite form in indefinite contexts is mostly limited to a copula verb together with a season term in the definite form (around 90% of the hits), see the examples in (5) below.

(5) a. ikke akkurat nu da når d e vinntern (Norwegian)
not just now then when it is winter.DEF

'Not just now, when it's winter.' (kvaenangen_02uk)

b. ...nårr de e **såmmårn** (Norwegian)
when it is summer.DEF

'... when it is summer.' (lierne_01um)

c. har itte vøri **sammarn** ætterpå vett du (Norwegian)
has not been summer.DEF afterwards know you

'It has not been summer after that, you know.' (kirkenaer_04gk)

The remaining two hits (of the type shown in (4) above) are attested in Eastern Norway, i.e. in Hedmark (Åsnes) and in Western Sweden, i.e. in Dalarna (Åsen). These are given in (6) and (7) below.

(6) så dæmm skulle ha **mjæLLka** ee omm sæmmærn (Norwegian)
so they should have milk.DEF oh about summer.DEF

'...so that they would have milk during the summer.' (aasnes_ma_02)

(7) og wiktugestað før fafar, eð war at dier fingg (Övdalian)
and most_important.DEF for grandfather it was that they got

in **wattneð** i fjåseð
in water.DEF in cow-shed.DEF

'... and the most important (thing) for my grandfather was that they got running water in the cow-shed.' (aasen_35)

The use of the suffixed definite article with nouns following a quantifier is represented by only one hit that is not dubious, uttered by an older women in Trøndelag (Gauldal), see (8) below.

- (8) æ tok mæ gannske **mye tia** bære me skiving å tæining (Norw)
I took me quite much time.DEF both with writing and drawing
 ‘It took much time for me, both the writing and the drawing.’ (gauldal_04gk)

Faarlund et al. (1997:301 ff.) mention the possibility of having definite form of a noun when it is preceded by an adjective with ‘expressive meaning’, e.g. *svarte natta* (lit. dark night.DEF) *tjukke skogen* (lit. thick forest.DEF) etc. (ibid.), but this phenomenon is not found in the NDC.

3. Discussion

3.1 Distribution, age variation and the origin

Our results show a similar distribution of the suffixed definite article in indefinite contexts in Scandinavia as that reported in the dialect literature. In the literature, the use of the suffixed definite article is reported for Northern Swedish and the Fenno-Swedish dialects of Österbotten (Delsing 2003:16) and the NSD data confirm this picture. The NDC data, however, are less consistent with the picture presented in the existing literature, as the definite article in indefinite contexts is not found in the Swedish part of the corpus. This is probably due to the small size of the corpus. On the other hand, the definite article in indefinite contexts is found in Norway, but almost only in the construction ‘det er/var sommeren’ (lit. it is/was **the** summer), instead with mass-denoting nouns. The definite article on mass-denoting noun is found only in one Swedish location in Dalarna (Åsen) and in the Norwegian province of Hedmark (Åsnes). The definite article on a noun following a quantifier is only found once in the NDC, in Trøndelag. No examples of the definite article in indefinite contexts are found in Denmark, in the Faroes, or on Iceland. Last, but not least, the phenomenon is also more accepted (and used) by older informants than by younger, a fact indicating that it may be on its way to loose ground.

According to Vangsnes (2001:287 ff.), the use of definite article on mass-denoting noun phrases corresponds to both the definite and partitive article in French (in singular) and to both the definite and the indefinite article in French (in plural). Seen in this way, the definite article can be used as both definite article and as a partitive/plural indefinite article in the dialects that display definiteness on mass-denoting noun phrases (ibid.).

The origin of the use of definite articles in indefinite contexts (mainly on mass-denoting nouns) has not been investigated. Vangsnes (2001:288) notes that “there is widespread homophony between indefinite and definite plural forms on nouns in N[orth-]N[ortheastern] Swedish” and speculates that the development has started by the reanalysis of the plural affix as a carrier for the [MASS]-feature, and that the development in singular followed. The results from the ScanDiaSyn infrastructure suggest that the use of definiteness on mass-denoting nouns is more spread on singular than on plural nouns (cf. Section 1).

References

- Delsing, Lars-Olof. 2003. 'Syntaktisk variation i nordiska nominalfraser,' in Vangsnes, Øystein Alexander; Anders Holmberg & Lars-Olof Delsing (eds.) *Dialektsyntaktiska studier av den nordiska nominalfrasen*, Novus, Oslo, 11-64.
- Faarlund, Jan Terje, Svein Lie, and Kjell Ivar Vannebo. 1997. *Norsk referansegrammatikk*. Universitetsforlaget: Oslo.
- Vangsnes, Øystein Alexander. 2001. 'On noun phrase architecture, referentiality, and article systems'. *Studia Linguistica* 55, 249-299.

Web sites:

- Nordic Atlas of Language Structures (NALS) Journal: <http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nals>
- Nordic Dialect Corpus: <http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nota/scandiasyn/index.html>
- Nordic Syntax Database: <http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nota/scandiasyn/index.html>