

ICONIC MOTIVATION FOR THE DEFINITE ARTICLE
IN ENGLISH GEOGRAPHICAL PROPER NAMES

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1. The goal of this article is to explore the ways the definite article is used in English geographical names and argue in favor of an iconic explanation for this little researched quirk of English grammar. More specifically the article will inquire into the reasons why the presence of the definite article should be obligatory in some geographical proper names while is not the case with others and propose a unified account reducing the welter of usages illustrated in (1)–(4) to a simple rule driven by iconic principles.

- | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| (1) Colorado | (3) The Colorado (River) |
| (2) The Colorado Plateau | (4) Colorado Springs |

The theoretical foundations these claims are based on are the ostensive approach to proper names developed in Kripke (1980), the account of the nature of the definite article presented in Hawkins (1991), and the iconic perspective on language formulated in Haiman (1980) and reexamined in Croft (1990). The ideas of Kripke (1980) and Hawkins (1991) will be briefly recalled in section 1.2 below, while the insights underlying the iconic perspective will, for reasons of space, be largely taken for granted and relied on in general but not invoked in any detail below.

The theory built on these foundations will be substantiated with and tested against a corpus of geographical proper names collected predominantly from American English publications¹ and excluding any proper names (PNs) which are modified or structured around an *of phrase*, as these PNs always require

¹ British usage, as reported in Douglas – Kozłowska (1988), may be different in some cases (e.g. *The Yellowstone National Park* vs. American English *Yellowstone National Park*) and will require a slight variation in the argument put forward to account for it.

the presence of an article and can be accounted for on language internal basis, e.g.:

- (5) The Isle of Wight (6) An Independent Israel (7) The new Paris

The data will thus exclude cases exemplified in (5)–(7) and focus on geographical proper names in which language internal explanation is insufficient to predict the incidence of the definite article. The publications furnishing data to the corpus will likewise exclude maps, press titles, captions, and any other text types where articles may be expendable and usage might seem more uniform than it really is.

2. Given the long-standing tradition of language internal explanation in linguistics, inviting scholars to look inside language for the explanation of linguistic data and shy away from extralinguistic reality, it was only natural to approach cases like (1)–(4) by examining their internal structure. An inevitable consequence of that approach, however, was that any piece of information relevant to the status of the name was believed to reside in the structure of the name itself. In linguistic practice it has thus led to the belief that either such irregular usages can be accounted for by the presence (or lack) of modifying material (i.e. plateau, river and springs (?) in (1)–(4) above) or no explanation can be had and the anomaly should be listed in the lexicon.

The prospects offered by this framework to the researcher are, however, bleak. How little can be accomplished reasoning along these lines can be best appreciated by giving some thought to the unparalleled but undeniable tendency that the newer the framework the less explanation is offered. The classic and largely dated Jespersen (1949) advances as many as four distinct explanations for the presence of the definite article in geographical proper names (cf. below), while the newest account of the grammar of English proper names in Longobardi (1995) gives up the hope of finding any explanation for this type of usages and resigns to discussing proper names against the background of personal names only. Any discussion of the earlier approaches to the problem necessarily entails thus unearthing proposals put forward well before the birth of the theories pursued nowadays.

The most wide-ranging generalization arrived at by reasoning along the traditional lines so far has been the observation that morphologically plural PNs tend to take the definite article:

- (8) The Rocky Mountains (9) The Bahamas
(10) The Badlands (11) The Netherlands

The regularity has been stated several times with varying degrees of assurance in the scope of its applicability, but whether a grammarian claims this appli-

cability to be universal (e.g., Jespersen 1949) or downgrades it to a mere tendency (e.g., Quirk et al. 1972), there are two obvious objections that can be raised against it. One is the range of data that observation can validly account for:

- (12) Yosemite Falls (13) Burnham Beeches

(12)–(13) clearly show that the plural does not necessarily have to trigger the presence of the definite article nor the other way round, and the pattern certainly is a regularity but not a fixed rule. More importantly, however, this observation does not offer any explanation for the pattern it captures beyond a fairly vague statement that plurality somehow does not go hand in hand with proper name status.² An otherwise interesting observation is thus not transformed into a piece of sound linguistic theory.

Another explanation quite frequently put forward in that tradition of research is the claim that the use of the definite article in some geographical proper names is triggered by the presence of a common noun / common nouns in the structure of the name itself. The explanatory power of this claim is, however, even more dubious than it was the case in the generalization discussed above. It does not improve on the vague statement of the causes for the definite article to be used in some PNs and is far less accurate in predicting its distribution. The generalization based on plurality was short on theory, but counterexamples were relatively few; here they seem to outnumber the usages supporting the claim:

- (14) The Hudson River (15) Hudson Bay
(16) The Bering Sea (17) Bearing Island
(18) Lake Superior (19) Cape Fear

The generalization can not be saved even by adopting the unlikely assumption that it makes sense to dissect the proper name into the common noun and core PN parts. Whether the modifying items precede the putative core PN element (e.g.: *lake* or *cape* in (18)–(19)) or trail it (e.g.: *river*, *bay*, *sea* or *island* in (14)–(17)), it is difficult to discern any direct correlation between the presence of such material and the use of the definite article, especially in view of the fact that the names made up of common nouns only (18)–(19) do not seem to need the article at all. The traditional recipe to work around such problems has been to pronounce some of the modifying material restrictive, i.e. triggering

² It is naturally tempting to claim that plural names can not be unique, but as has been shown in Kadmon (1990) the belief follows from the preoccupation of definiteness writers with singular count nouns and is inherently mistaken. The plural equivalent of a unique individual referent is a unique maximal set of referents.

the use of the definite article, and leave the rest under the rubric of unrestrictive modifying material, which does not require the use of any article. That does not help much, however, as on language internal basis there is no ground to argue independently why *river* and *sea* in (14) and (16) should be restrictive while *bay*, *island*, *cape* or *lake* in (15) and (17)–(19) should not.

Still another explanation advanced in that frame of mind is the claim that the presence of the definite article may follow from the elliptical structure of a PN. A classic statement of the doctrine can be found already in Sweet: “We have an instinctive feeling that the Thames is short for the river Thames” (after Jespersen 1949: 546). Besides extending the scope of the previous claim (*river* is no doubt taken here to be a common noun), this observation does very little to explain the actual usage. In fact it appears to be the most restricted of the generalizations discussed so far:

- (20) The Rocky Mountains vs. (20') The Rockies
 (21) The River Thames vs. (21') The Thames

Since the full forms require the use of the definite article just as the elliptical ones do (cf. (20)–(21)), the presence of the article does not seem to be sensitive to ellipsis and the relevance of this explanation (if any) is limited to few cases like

- (22) Pall Mall Street vs. (22') The Pall Mall

where the alternation is evidenced historically (cf. Jespersen 1949: 546).

The last stand of the followers of this framework is the claim that the problem PNs have been borrowed wholesale along with the definite article. Pointing to the rules of the donor language as the source of the definite article usages, this explanation is then the only one able to provide a clear statement of the reasons why the definite article should be used at all, e.g.:

- (23) The Hague (23') The Matternhorn

where it follows from the grammar rules of Dutch and German respectively. Again, however, the number of cases accountable for in this way is scant and mostly limited to the names of few cities and a host of alpine summits.

The way of thinking implicit in all the claims presented above was enshrined by Russell in his theory of definite descriptions, where proper names have been held up as prime examples of the concept ever since it was introduced into the discourse of linguists and philosophers. Whether it was the uniqueness of a PN, its definiteness or any other feature that was to be inquired into, it was thus the definite description that was expected to provide any sufficient and necessary information needed to confirm or disclaim the presence of such a

feature. And given the complex structure of the formulae spelling out the descriptions in detail (cf. Hawkins 1978 for a concise discussion), it was only natural to come to see the proper names corresponding to these descriptions as their handy abbreviations.

Should the usage pattern be in any way unclear, the natural reaction of the researcher was then to look to the definite descriptions or their abbreviated nutshell versions for explanation. The evidence examined by linguists obviously was the latter, but the approach was the same; the only piece of evidence to be examined was the structure of the name itself. As has been shown above, formalizing this way of thinking has not, however, inspired any new insights and actually led to the attrition of all earlier proposals.

The only piece of published research proposing a fresh approach to the problem has been Hewson (1972). What is important, however, this account has been grounded in a paradigm quite different from the scholarship tradition referred to above. Working in an obscure psychomechanic framework developed by the mostly forgotten French linguist Guillaume in early 1920s, Hewson (1972: 109) observed that the names typically requiring the presence of the definite article (e.g., names of oceans, seas, rivers, canals, peninsulas and gulfs) refer to objects whose external boundaries are for the most part incomplete, and the names which do not require the presence of the definite article (e.g., the names of streets, squares, capes, islands, bays, counties) refer to objects whose external boundaries are quite distinct or are the outlines themselves (e.g., capes, points, or mounts), and attributed that regularity to the power of the definite article to lend form to the otherwise formless referents. The validity of this explanation apart, Hewson went thus off the beaten track of examining the structure of proper names and based his account on an observation linking the linguistic behavior of English proper names with a feature of their referents. The essence of his claim was thus iconic.

In order to tap these promising insights it is imperative, however, to adopt a theoretical platform which would be less rigid than the theory of definite descriptions and equip the researcher with more leeway in searching for an explanation of linguistic data by venturing beyond the structure of the name itself.

3. Such a platform was proposed in Kripke (1980, and a number of earlier papers), where he challenged the definite description status of proper names by pointing out that one PN may have several distinct definite descriptions assigned to it depending on the persuasion of the scholar or the possible world he or she is located in. E.g.:

- the hotbed of mass oppression and working class exploitation (hard line communist view of the USA),

- the fountain spring of civil liberties and free enterprise (complacent American view of the USA),

It is not surprising that it should be the case given the different backgrounds of the scholars active in the field. In a system where reference is uniquely determined by the definite description a multiplicity of possible distinct definite descriptions means, however, that there should be as many referents as there are definite descriptions, which contradicts the basic insight that proper names refer uniquely.

Kripke claimed therefore that PNs are not definite descriptions, whose uniqueness ultimately depends on the context, but rigid designators, i.e. linguistic entities whose referents always stay the same in any possible world. In this framework the uniqueness of a name is then ensured by the fact that name giving is inherently unique. Whether it is accompanied by pomp and circumstance (e.g., christening ships and babies) or done quietly by a lucky explorer, the act of pointing to a referent and naming it necessarily presupposes that there is only one such referent pointed to and named at a time. It is obviously natural to point to and name collective referents comprising large numbers of individual referents (e.g., mountain ranges and archipelagoes) or point to an already named referent and assign it a new name (e.g., the revolutionary practice of renaming streets and other major landmarks), but in either case the unique reference of such names is warranted by the nature of the ostensive act of name giving itself.

Once a name is assigned and is successfully passed to other users in an unbroken chain of succession (otherwise renaming would be needed), the name may acquire various connotations depending on who passes the name on, where, when and etc. For our purposes, however, the critical element is the fact that any name assigned ostensively will be unique independently of its grammatical properties (plurality, article usage, etc.) and geographical proper names clearly belong to that group.

If this approach is combined with the analysis of the meaning of the definite article developed in Hawkins (1991: 414), where the definite article is shown to conventionally implicate the uniqueness of any referring expressions to be found in its scope, then some proper names quoted in (1)–(4), and repeated below for convenience, will be marked for uniqueness twice, while other ones only once.

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|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| (24) Colorado | (25) The Colorado (River) |
| (26) The Colorado Plateau | (27) Colorado Springs |

All four names are inherently unique by virtue of their rigid designator status, but (26)–(27) are additionally marked for uniqueness by the presence of the

definite article. Such redundancy may obviously be consigned to the general redundancy found in language, and that seems to be the practice of those linguists who give up the hope of finding any sensible explanation for such usages and favor listing them in the lexicon as the only way of handling the anomaly.

It does not, however, have to be the case if the default uniqueness of such names may be shown to be overridden on a consistent basis, as that would create a need for the uniqueness to be expressed in some other way and the definite article would certainly be the most natural choice of a linguistic device to do it. The crucial point obviously is finding the factor(s) which override the inherent uniqueness of rigid designators to make way for the definite article used in these names to fulfill its standard function, i.e. implicate the uniqueness of the referring expressions found in its scope. Identifying such factors would, however, kill two birds with one stone; it would eliminate the redundancy, i.e. account for the “irregular” usages by proposing a consistent rule, and prove that definite article usages in proper names rest on the same principles as elsewhere in English.

The task might look challenging but the good news is that viewing proper names as rigid designators does not constrain the search for such factors in the way the theory of definite descriptions did. Adopting the ostensive platform the researchers are not bound in any way to examining the structure of the names only, and linguistic custom permitting, they can look for them anywhere, e.g., pursuing further the insights of Hewson (1972), which will be done below.

4. The essence of the observation made in Hewson (1972) is brought out best by the contrast between the names of some US national parks and the names of the areas they were created to protect:

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|------------------------------------|-----|---------------------------|
| (28) Everglades National Park | vs. | (28') The Everglades |
| (29) Grand Canyon National Park | vs. | (29') The Grand Canyon |
| (30) Grand Teton National Park | vs. | (30') The Grand Tetons |
| (31) Smoky Mountains National Park | vs. | (31') The Smoky Mountains |

No matter what kind of land is referred to – be it swamp (28–28'), canyons (29–29'), or mountains (30–31') – the definite article consistently disappears whenever a clearly delimited territory is carved out of a general area whose boundaries are blurred and vague.

A similar contrast is observable between the names of various administrative divisions, consistently used without the definite article, and the PNs referring to general areas, which are equally consistently preceded by the definite article. The former are unequivocally delimited by law, while the boundaries of the latter are at best fuzzy and disputable:

- | | | |
|---------------------|-----|----------------------------|
| (32) North Carolina | vs. | (32') The Piedmont |
| (33) Utah | vs. | (33') The Great Basin |
| (34) Colorado | vs. | (34') The Colorado Plateau |
| (35) Idaho | vs. | (35') The (Old)West |
| (36) Illinois | vs. | (36') The Mid West |

Obviously it is not only American state lines that appear definite enough to warrant stable and easy to perceive outlines:

- | | | |
|---------------------|-----|-----------------------|
| (37) Queensland | vs. | (37') The Outback |
| (38) Lancastershire | vs. | (38') The North |
| (39) Turkey | vs. | (39') The Levant |
| (40) Syria | vs. | (40') The Middle East |
| (41) Nepal | vs. | (41') The Orient |
| (42) Greenland | vs. | (42') The Arctic |
| (43) Israel | vs. | (43') The Holy Land |
| (44) Mali | vs. | (44') The Sahel |

Whether these are state lines (32-37), shire borders (38), or boundaries of countries (39-44) that lend these areas clear-cut outlines, their names stand on their own; whenever the clarity of the outline is missing, the PN is consistently preceded by the definite article.

As observed in Hewson (1972), the existence of distinct and perceptible boundaries of the referent clearly bears on article usage; more specifically, however, under the ostensive framework proposed above, the lack of such distinct and perceptible borders may be claimed to be an iconic factor which overrides the inherent uniqueness of proper names designating such referents and naturally selects the definite article to reaffirm it. In the light of the discussion in Hawkins (1991) it is the most obvious choice of an English grammar device carrying the implicature of uniqueness³ and such use of the definite article may be viewed as an alternative way of expressing the most fundamental property of proper names in case it is overridden by fuzzy and blurred outlines of the referents. The principle underlying the usage here is thus clearly iconic but the only function of the definite article used in such contexts is to implicate the uniqueness of the name in its scope, which means that the usage itself is governed by exactly the same principles as elsewhere in English.

The finding may then be summarized in the Iconic Principle:

The inherent uniqueness of English proper names may be overridden by perceptible features of their referents and reaffirmed by the default use of the definite article.

³ Other determiners are obviously also used in appropriate circumstances (cf. below), but the definite article has by far the widest currency and seems to be the default choice. Besides the Indian Ocean, the Alps and the Rockies there are then also Indian Ocean's Seychelles, Austria's Alps, our Rockies, etc., but the definite article will stand here for the other determiners wherever they could be used alternatively.

Depending on the features found to be the iconic factors capable of overriding the uniqueness of proper names, the principle may then crystallize in distinct rules accounting for specific usages.

Discussing generic sentences Declerck (1986: 175) argues that the definite article is one of the devices capable of acting as a boundary for the number of events a sentence refers to. In the examples discussed so far it appears to serve in a similar capacity in a spatial sense, providing a vicarious boundary for the referents whose indeterminate outline is further underscored by the inherent uncountability of their referring expressions (Wierzbicka 1988: 539). PNs clearly appear then to need perceptible borders in their referents to be presumed unique, and wherever fuzzy and vague outlines of their referents compromise that default uniqueness it is shored up by invoking the definite article.

The boundary need not, however, be as explicit as the legal divisions defensible in court and defined in international treaties. The clear outline can be much rather a state of mind than a question of fact, as can be easily gleaned from the contrast between the expressions referring to the historical areas whose borders are no longer acknowledged, and those which have never enjoyed such status:

- | | | |
|---------------|-----|--------------------|
| (45) Provence | vs. | (45') The Riviera |
| (46) Mercia | vs. | (46') The Midlands |
| (47) Prussia | vs. | (47') The Ruhr |

The areas lacking deeply rooted historical outlines and connotations (45'-47') need to have their uniqueness restored by the use of the definite article just like any other PN which is vague as to its outer limits. This may, however, change once the borders are declared officially and widely recognized:

- | | | |
|--------------|-----|------------------|
| (48) Ukraine | vs. | (49) The Ukraine |
|--------------|-----|------------------|

(49) is listed in numerous grammars, e.g., Quirk et al. (1972: 162), it is, nevertheless, (48) that is generally used in recent writings referring to the independent state of Ukraine. The declaration of statehood and international recognition of the borders which had already existed before have thus changed the article pattern, providing an almost live example of the interplay between the perceived borders of the referent and the use the definite article in geographical PNs.⁴

The Iconic Principle may then be claimed to crystallize in Rule I:

The definite article will precede any proper names whose referents display boundaries which are fuzzy and difficult to perceive.

⁴ A similar case relating a change in article usage to the decision of the Privy Council determining the borders of two Canadian provinces is reported in Hewson (1972).

E.g.:

a)⁵ regions whose boundaries have never been officially promulgated:

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|---------------------------------|----------------------|
| (50) The Far East | (52) The North Slope |
| (51) The Antarctic ⁶ | (53) The Arctic |

b) deserts and wildernesses:

- | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| (54) The Sahara | (58) The Wahiba Sands |
| (55) The Kalahari | (59) The Etosha Pan |
| (56) The Mojave Desert | (60) The Badlands |
| (57) The Bonneville Flats | (61) The Tundra |

c) plains, lowlands, plateaus, and basins:

- | | |
|------------------------|----------------------|
| (62) The (Great)Plains | (65) The Lowlands |
| (63) The Prairie | (66) The Great Basin |
| (64) The Tibet Plateau | (67) The Llanos |

d) glaciers and ice caps:

- | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| (68) The Malaspina Glacier | (70) The Ross Ice Shelf |
| (69) The Columbia Ice Cap | (71) The Sargeant Icefield |

e) wetlands, swamps, and marshes:

- | | |
|----------------------|----------------------------|
| (72) The Everglades | (74) The Okeefanokee Swamp |
| (73) The Big Cypress | (75) The Fens |

f) peninsulas and depressions:

- | | |
|------------------|------------------------------|
| (76) The Crimea | (78) The Antarctic Peninsula |
| (77) The Yucatan | (79) The Dankil Depression |

g) borderless bodies of water

- | | |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| (80) The Indian Ocean | (82) The Amazon |
| (81) The North Sea | (83) The (River) Thames |
| (84) The St. Lawrence Seaway | (87) The Drake Passage |

⁵ The classification is not intended to have any geographical significance and its only function is grouping referents for the sake of clarity. The variety of classifying expressions found in each category (e.g. desert, flats, slope, etc.) provides, however, additional support for the claim that the use is conditioned by the Iconic Principle and not by individual lexical items.

⁶ The Antarctic covers the continent and the adjacent frigid waters and snow capped archipelagoes, while Antarctica refers to the continent itself.

- | | |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| (85) The Solent | (88) The North West Passage |
| (86) The Sund | (89) The Gulf Stream |

The borderless status of some of these watery bodies can obviously be questioned, as (i) browsing through an atlas it is easy to spot seas whose shores circumscribe them almost entirely e.g., (90), let alone those which are completely landlocked, e.g., (91), and (ii) rivers are commonly viewed as fairly fixed water flows more akin to man made canals than shapeless currents or oceans.

- | | |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| (90) The Black Sea | (91) The Dead Sea |
|--------------------|-------------------|

in (i) the issue seems to be that the prototypical sea has mostly arbitrary borders only partially fixed by the shoreline (cf. The North Sea, The Norwegian Sea, etc.) and the prototype is extended on a handful of more bounded seas and landlocked reservoirs matching them in size or salinity.

What is at stake in (ii), however, is the perception of the city dweller. Most rivers flowing through major academic cities of the Western World do look as fixed in the course of their riverbeds as man made canals, but if rivers are considered in their natural condition and dams, levees, weirs, embankments and other flood control devices are done away with, it is no longer the case any more. It is common lore of geologists and any flood victim that rivers swell and dwindle, flood and dry up, wash out their banks and change their course even when they are dammed and harnessed, let alone when they are not. And it was clearly the latter that was the case in the middle of the seventeenth century when the usage finally settled on preceding river names with the definite article (Hewson 1972: 20).

The uniqueness of proper names referring to rivers is then overridden by the fuzzy and shifting boundaries of their referents, putting these PNs in the company of the territories lacking clearly perceivable and stable outlines.

The contrast observable in:

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|------------------------|-----|-----------------------|
| (92) Mississippi | vs. | (92') The Mississippi |
| (93) Missouri | vs. | (93') The Missouri |
| (94) Colorado | vs. | (94') The Colorado |
| (95) Stratford on Avon | vs. | (95') The Avon |

is then fundamentally the same as the contrast exemplified throughout section 2, i.e. rooted in the fact that there are no grounds to question the uniqueness of PNs referring to clearly delimited areas (i.e. states in (92)–(94) and towns (95)), while there is every reason to do so if the PN refers to a vague territory and ultimately needs the support of the definite article to mark its uniqueness.

5. Further support for the claim that the lack of a perceivable outline in the referent is an iconic factor overriding the default uniqueness of proper names and triggering the use of the definite article comes from the fact that the names whose referents do have borders which are clear and easy to draw do not typically take the article. E.g.:

a) countries and their administrative divisions

- | | |
|--------------|----------------------|
| (96) Germany | (98) New South Wales |
| (97) Arizona | (99) Wiltshire |

b) continents and islands

- | | |
|-----------------|------------------------|
| (100) Africa | (102) Christmas Island |
| (101) Greenland | (103) Bikini Atoll |

c) lakes and reservoirs

- | | |
|---------------------|---------------------|
| (104) Lake Michigan | (106) Loch Ness |
| (105) Lake Mead | (107) Derwent Water |

d) towns and cities

- | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------|
| (108) New York City | (112) Wrocław |
| (109) Fort Bragg | (113) Deer Creek Station |
| (110) Bunker Hill | (114) Port Moresby |
| (111) Canyon Village | (115) Moose Jaw |

e) streets, squares, parks and bridges

- | | |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| (116) Oxford Street | (121) Brent Drive |
| (117) Lexington Avenue | (122) Sunset Boulevard |
| (118) Penny Lane | (123) Time Square |
| (119) Lofton Road | (124) Brooklyn Bridge |
| (120) Oak Circle | (125) Central Park |

f) castles, abbeys and palaces

- | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| (126) Windsor Castle | (128) Westminster Abbey |
| (127) Buckingham Palace | (129) Lindisfarne Priory |

g) national parks and refuges

- (130) Redwood National Park
 (131) Joshua Tree National Monument
 (132) San Juan National Historic Site

- (133) Gettysburg National Military Park
 (134) Petersburg National Battlefield
 (135) Big Cypress National Preserve

Whether the distinct and perceptible border of the referent is warranted by administrative boundaries in (a) and (g), continuous shoreline in (b) and (c), city limits in (d), curbs, hedges and fences in (e) or moats and walls in (f), the definite article is not needed as predicted by Rule I.

And the same is the case in names whose referents display outlines which are technically incomplete but the gaps in their outlines are so small to make them approximate the unbroken contours of the referents exemplified above and can be easily perceived as fully closed (cf. the cognitive analysis of preposition usages in Langacker (1987: 66)). E.g.:

- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| (136) Botany Bay | (141) Puget Sound |
| (137) Pearl Harbor | (142) Yosemite Valley |
| (138) Cook Inlet | (143) Bryce Canyon |
| (139) Harmony Cove | (144) Carlsbad Cavern |
| (140) Cox Bight | (145) Mammoth Cave |

The incomplete outline of the referents of (136)–(145) is unquestionable, as harbors, coves, bays, sounds, bights and inlets would not be harbors, bights, coves, etc. without openings for ships and boats to sail in, valleys and canyons need mouths and entrances to be genuine valleys and canyons, and caves and caverns would not be known without slits for cavers to slip in. The gaps created in the outlines of such referents by their mouths and entrances are, however, sufficiently insignificant in relation to their circumferences not to matter in the perception of their contour and, consequently, in the article usage with their names.

In line with the iconic rule formulated above the definite article should, however, be required wherever the gap in the contour widens enough to make the outline of the referent substantially incomplete, and indeed there is evidence of such proper name behavior:

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------------|
| (146) The Ohio Valley | (148) The Bristol Channel |
| (147) The Grand Canyon | (149) The Wash |

Whether it is a major river that makes the valley wide and open, e.g., (146), sheer size and complexity of the referent's shape (147) or its broad mouth (148)–(149), in each case the gap in the contour is sizable and the definite article present.

6. Any discussion of the contour of the referent of a PN naturally presupposes that the referent can be perceived in two or three dimensional space. There has

to be at least width and length to make any sensible statements on any contour in general. In less mathematical terms it simply means that the referent in question has to have some area; if fewer dimensions are involved – i.e. one or none – all there is to perceive are lines and points respectively, covering no area at all and displaying no contours whatsoever.

The issue of the contour is thus relevant only for those referents of geographical PNs, which can be perceived to extend over an area, while for those PNs whose area is insignificant, the issue simply does not arise. Linguistically, that translates into the impossibility of overriding the default uniqueness of a geographical PN on the grounds of incomplete outline or vague boundary if the referent of that PN can be perceived as a point or line, and cover an infinitesimal area which can be disregarded. Under the iconic Rule I the PNs whose referents meet these conditions will therefore not be preceded by the definite article and stand on their own.

The first pair of conditions identified above – insignificant area and punctual perception – can clearly be satisfied by PNs referring to points of maximum elevation, promontories, waterholes, springs and geysers; it is easy to think of them as points and the area they cover is truly infinitesimal:

- | | |
|------------------------|----------------------|
| (150) Mount Everest | (156) K2 |
| (151) Lookout Mountain | (157) Cape Horn |
| (152) Lassen Peak | (158) Beachy Head |
| (153) Ben Nevis | (159) Lizard's End |
| (153) Ayers Rock | (160) Agab Waterhole |
| (155) Sunset Crater | (161) Old Faithful |

The variety of class names available to cartographers and sampled above is really impressive, but what is more important, all these PNs stand on their own without the crutch of the definite article as predicted.

The second pair of conditions – insignificant area and linear perception can technically be met by PNs referring to creeks and streams, waterfalls, mountain passes, beaches, straits, and canals. Firstly, all of these can readily be thought of as some kinds of lines: meticulously straight in man-made canals, more tortuous in creeks, streams and beaches, crossing rivers along different paths in waterfalls, u-shaped in mountain passes, or defining the shortest distance between neighboring land masses in straits. Secondly, the area they cover, if any, seems to be so narrow in relation to their length to be easily disregarded as inconsequential:

- | | |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| (162) Bonanza Creek | (166) Waikiki Beach |
| (163) Twin Falls | (167) Burnham Beaches |
| (164) Cumberland Gap | (168) Victoria Strait |
| (165) Half Moon Pass | (169) The Panama Canal |

Only the PNs referring to canals do not behave as predicted, but that will be taken care of in section 6 below together with some other counterexamples the inquisitive reader may come up with. If area and dimensions do matter the definite article should, however, be required wherever the fuzzy referent comes to cover substantial area which can not be summarily disregarded. And indeed there is evidence confirming such PN behavior:

- | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| (170) Yellowstone Creek | (170') The Yellowstone (River) |
| (171) Victoria Strait | (171') The Solent |
| (172) Hudson Strait | (172') The Drake Passage |

Where the narrow and easy to wade creek swells into a wide river or the thin line of a strait grows into a broad passage, the transition is also accompanied by a change in the article usage reflecting the fact that under the iconic rule the emergence of a substantial area covered by the referent makes the uniqueness of its name sensitive to the completeness of the referent's contour and ultimately governs the article usage.

In light of the evidence presented above the relationship between the use of the definite article in geographical proper names and the outlines of their referents is clearly explicit enough to bear out the claim that substantial incompleteness of the outline is an iconic factor capable of overriding the default uniqueness of proper names with all its attendant consequences summarized in Rule I.

The rule driven by the Iconic Principle can coherently account for an overwhelming majority of definite article usages with geographical proper names in the corpus underlying this investigation and, it is believed, in the English-speaking world at large. There is, however, a number of names the rule proposed above is insufficient to account for (e.g., (173) and (174)) and the article will now turn to the discussion of such apparent counterexamples:

- | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| (173) The Netherlands | (174) The Great Salt Lake |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|

The borders of both referents are fully complete beyond any doubt and under the rule put forward above both names should stand on their own without the definite article supporting the expression of their uniqueness. There is no denying that it is the case, but under the Iconic Principle there may be other factors besides the outline of the referent which are capable of overriding the default uniqueness of the PN and triggering the use of the definite article. One such factor will be proposed in section 5 below.

7. The most conspicuous group of proper names the rule discussed above seems to be inapplicable to is best illustrated by the contrast found in (175):

(200) The White House (201) The Great Salt Lake

The clue leading to the discovery of such a factor seems to be the fact that (200) is truly white and (201) is both genuinely large and saline, i.e. the fact that such names really describe their referents and appear to be genuine definite descriptions which proper names have been shown not to be.

It remains yet to be seen whether that hypothesis is viable and powerful enough to support positing one more iconic factor, but whatever the outcome of the quest for such a factor, the adoption of the Iconic Principle makes the rules governing the use of the definite article in English proper names follow the same precepts as anywhere else in English, which not only simplifies the grammar of the English proper name but also furnishes further support for the account of the definite article put forward in Hawkins (1991).

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