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## English Indefinite Ordinals: A First Explanation

**Abstract:** English ordinals are commonly preceded by the definite article but the pattern is not universal. There are quite a few well attested instances of English ordinals preceded by the indefinite article, which, strangely enough, have not been discussed in published research so far. The paper thus breaks new ground by documenting the pattern and offering an explanation of indefinite ordinal usages. In doing so, the paper draws on data culled from the Corpus of Contemporary American English and, in the absence of publications specifically focused on indefinite English ordinals, relies on broader accounts of the indefinite article. The paper shows that indefinite ordinal usages are well rooted in the meaning of the indefinite article and serve to express the speaker's viewpoint.

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### 1. Introduction

Any grammar of English lists ordinal numerals as textbook examples of items that are commonly used with the definite article and in any language corpus there are thousands of examples that clearly illustrate such self-evident statements. For instance, in the 560-million-word Corpus of Contemporary American English (hereafter COCA) (Davies 2008), there are as many as 791,825 instances in which the ordinal is preceded by the definite article, e.g.:

- (1) Baylor didn't find much rhythm until *the second* half when it used Brady Heslip's 3-pointer to cut Kentucky's lead to 63–50 with 8:53 remaining.

At the same time, though, COCA lists 66,645 examples of indefinite ordinals, i.e. 8.41% of the total. They are especially well represented in statements reporting that an incumbent intends to be reelected, e.g.:

- (2) New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg says he is ready to run for *a* second term.
- (3) If he were to seek *a* 10th term this fall, Stupak said, the outcome would never be in doubt. "Every time I vote, someone gets mad at me," he said. "But when it comes to November, they always vote for me."

In fact indefinite ordinals are found in all 80 COCA examples in which incumbents are reported to run for another numbered term in office and in all 83 examples in which they seek one, while definite ordinals are not used even a single time in any of these two contexts.

The goal of this paper is to account for the difference noted above and then, building on that explanation, show on a broader basis that the use of indefinite ordinals serves to express a number of viewpoints rooted in a key aspect of the meaning of the indefinite article. The argument will thus start with a brief review of the standard accounts of the indefinite and definite articles and then proceed to applying them to analyzing indefinite ordinal examples retrieved from COCA.

## 2. Indefinite and definite article basics

Ever since the publication of Hawkins (1978), reissued for the third time in 2015, it has been generally agreed that the key ingredient of the meaning carried by the indefinite article is exclusive reference. The concept was further refined in a number of publications, e.g. Declerck (1986), Hawkins (1991) or Berezowski (2009), but its essence boils down to a simple inference drawn from article use in examples like (4) below:

- (4) *An* Air Canada flight bound for Tokyo had to make *an* emergency landing today when *an* engine shut down just after it took off in Toronto. There are reports that small pieces of metal debris—possibly from the engine—fell from the plane and smashed through *a* car window. Nobody was hurt on the ground and the plane landed safely after dumping fuel.

The news that an engine failed in flight sounds perilous, but the fact that the plane managed to turn back to the airport and land safely naturally invites the inference that it must have been equipped with more engines than the one actually referred to in (4) and any such conclusion is obviously strengthened by the common knowledge that long distance commercial flights, e.g. from Toronto to Tokyo, are usually operated by aircraft with two or more engines. The engine referred to by the indefinite singular nominal in (4) may thus be safely taken to be a member of a set related to the situation at hand and including other items of the same kind which remain implicit and happen not to be referred to.

In (4) the existence of surplus implicit members in the set including the referent of an indefinite nominal is only implied, but it is quite easy to find examples in which they are explicitly mentioned, e.g.:

- (5) *An* impeller blew and *an* engine shut down later that night, when he was well past the point where he would have turned into the Charleston approach. He turned back and was limping in with *a* high anxiety level when the other engine overheated. He ended up at the end of *a* tow line.

This time around the referent of the indefinite nominal is a boat engine and, as noted above, the use of the indefinite article should be taken to imply that the boat has at least one more engine onboard. At first this supposition is confirmed indirectly by the information that the failure of an engine slowed the boat down but did not stop her, and then directly in sentence two, where the other engine is explicitly referred to in the context of its overheating.

Thus the referent of an indefinite singular nominal belongs to a contextually salient set featuring at least two members. One of them is actually referred to while the rest of the set is excluded, which prompted Hawkins (1978) to call that property exclusive reference. Since either the hearer alone or both the speaker and the hearer do not have enough information to work out which set member is actually referred to and which one or ones is or are excluded, any such reference is truly indefinite. If only the hearer is in the dark as to the identity of the intended referent, the reference has traditionally been called specific, and whenever both the speaker and the hearer are clueless about referent identity, the reference has been termed non-specific, but in either case all potential referents are similar enough in that they do not stand out from the crowd in a way which could make any of them uniquely identifiable to all interlocutors (von Heusinger 2002).

The basic ingredients of the meaning carried by the definite article are more difficult to summarize, as the scholars investigating its properties have produced quite divergent descriptions (cf. Lyons [1999] for a detailed review or von Heusinger [2006] for a succinct one), but for the purpose at hand it will suffice to assume after the mainstream accounts in Kadmon (1990) and in Hawkins (1991) that it is grammatical to use the definite article with a nominal if the referent of that nominal can be uniquely identified by the speaker and hearer alike.

### 3. Ordinals, articles and politics

Given that basic assumption it is easy to see why the definite article so frequently patterns with ordinal numerals. Since they are commonly used to assign numerical values to sets of items forming sequences, e.g. quarters of a year, innings of a baseball game, results of a race, etc., any such referent can be easily and uniquely identified both by its place in the sequence, e.g. the third inning obviously follows the second one and precedes the fourth, and by the features responsible for its placement, e.g. a runner who finished second plainly clocked a faster time than the athlete who finished third but a slower one than the winner, etc.

The use of the definite article with nominals picking out so evidently identifiable referents is thus only to be expected, e.g.:

- (6) Betsy King won the LPGA World Match Play Championship on Sunday the same way she won two previous tournaments on the Princeville Makai course—by watching an opponent plunk her approach shot into the water hazard on the 18th hole.

The author invokes the set of holes on a golf course and within that set refers with some incredulity to the item assigned number 18, which makes it uniquely identifiable both by its mere place in the sequence of professional golf course holes and by its other unique features, i.e. the facts that it is the final one and placed next to a fateful water hazard. Given such a wealth of information to identify the referent of the final nominal in (6) it is no wonder that it takes the definite article, and the same is the case in thousands of other uses of English ordinal numerals.

Consequently, it might seem quite obvious that the same pattern should be followed in sentences reporting that incumbents seek or run for another term of office identified by an ordinal numeral, as exemplified in (2) and (3) above and repeated for the sake of convenience as (7) and (8) below:

- (7) New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg says he is ready to run for *a* second term.  
 (8) If he were to seek *a* 10th term this fall, Stupak said, the outcome would never be in doubt. "Every time I vote, someone gets mad at me," he said. "But when it comes to November, they always vote for me."

At first blush the use of the indefinite article in such cases might seem quite counterintuitive as even those speakers of English who are not mathematically gifted certainly can count to ten and uniquely identify the terms of office referred to in both examples by the places they occupy in either sequence. However, focusing on the easy identifiability of the numbered terms of office obfuscates a vital contextual cue that is crucial for article usage in such cases. The mayor referred to in (7) is only said to be ready to run for reelection and the congressman referred to in (8) merely muses on seeking one more term of office, which leaves no doubt that both statements were clearly made before the election, i.e. at a time when referring to a term of office neither of the incumbents have yet won with a definite nominal is cognitively feasible, mathematically simple but politically risky.

Since definite nominals pick out referents that are uniquely identifiable, using them in (7) and (8) could be taken to imply that for both politicians referred to (i.e. Mayor Bloomberg and Congressman Stupak, respectively) the results of the elections are already evident even though they have not started their campaigns yet. Communicating such a self-important attitude, even if only via an inference, would be tantamount to taking the results of voting for granted, which for an incumbent hoping for reelection would be at best immodest, if not impudent and disrespectful of the voters.

An easy way to prevent any such damaging intimations is to use the indefinite article, which, as noted in the previous section, implies that the set in question has referents which have not so far been referred to, e.g. terms of office number 2 and 10, respectively, and does not trigger inferences based on referent identifiability. The only downside of choosing that cautious path and foregoing the use of the definite article in a context where it would be perfectly at home is the fact that, as illustrated in (7) and (8) above, ordinal numerals do not order set members

uniquely but merely specify how many members the sets in question will have if the incumbents are reelected. For a politician it is not a high price to pay, though.

Given the scenario outlined above, it is no mystery why indefinite ordinals are as popular in statements on running for or seeking another term in office, as noted at the outset of this paper. They offer almost as much information as their potential counterparts with definite ordinals but guarantee that the statements do not give rise to inferences that the results of voting are foregone conclusions, which could mar the prospects of the candidates and be troublesome to their campaign managers. In other words, politicians follow thus essentially the same strategy as authors who give their books indefinite article titles, e.g. *A History of Poland*, *A Grammar of English*, etc. In objective terms it goes without saying that any country has just one history, every language one grammar, etc., but any such topic can be described from a variety of subjective perspectives and cast in a number of theoretical frameworks, which is humbly acknowledged by the use of the indefinite article (Berezowski 2009). Both groups differ only in their target audiences. Authors use the indefinite article to show deference to readers and reviewers while politicians use the same grammatical device to court voters.

However, if winning a race is assumed for the sake of an argument, the use of the definite article follows, e.g.:

- (9) MITT ROMNEY: We've seen this president trying to browbeat the Supreme Court. In the second term, he would remake it. Our freedoms would be in the hands of an Obama court. Not just for four years, but for the next 40. And we must not let that happen.

Speaking in the run-up to the 2012 US presidential election, Romney first referred obliquely to the term his opponent had actually served in the White House and then directly to the one that would follow if Obama stayed in office, assigning the latter term number two and referring to it as the second one. In hindsight it is clear that the inference triggered by the use of the definite ordinal proved quite fateful as Obama really ended up winning the election but for the sake of the argument put forward by Romney suggesting such an outcome was reasonable as he focused on highlighting the negative consequences of such a result.

#### 4. Indefinite ordinal construals

Politicians are not the only English users who benefit from using indefinite ordinals. The same is the case with scholars and journalists adducing arguments in support of a claim, e.g.:

- (10) First, the threat we were to defend against was always *an* “all-out nuclear attack.” With or without shelters, *a* war with retaliatory exchanges and *a* blizzard of missiles descending on the U.S. mainland could not be survived; the cliché was that “the living would envy the dead.” *A* second argument, much touted, was that civil defense would “destabilize” the strategy of deterrence. If one side had shelters, it might be encouraged to think that

it could “win” *a* nuclear war. Civil defense would thus diminish our security, by making war more “thinkable.” *A* third argument was that civil defense would only distract us from detente and arms control, in favor of “ludicrous mopping up plans for the post-attack era,” as *The New York Times* (with *a* very different editorial policy than today’s) put it in the 1980s. *A* fourth argument was directed against the urban evacuation proposals that were part of both early (1950s) and late (1980s) civil defense planning.

Switching to definite ordinals in any passage like this could easily be taken to imply that the later an argument is advanced, the less persuasive it is, i.e. that the second one in sequence will be taken to be a second class argument, the third one to be a third class argument, etc., while the use of indefinite ordinals does not give rise to any such ranking inferences. Indefinite referents, as shown in Gundel, Hedberg and Gundel, Hedberg & Zacharski (1993) are type identifiable only, which means that all that is intended to be known about them is the category or set they belong to. Otherwise they are presented as entities which are similar enough not to be distinguishable from one another.

The arguments in (10) are thus presented one after another because that is the way language works, but they are all alike as members of the same set created by the author and do not differ in their importance, power of persuasion, etc. The use of the indefinite ordinals in (10) merely signifies that the arguments are numbered for easier reference but they are not ordered or ranked in any way.

The same approach is followed in a variety of other contexts exemplified below:

- (11) Spread 1 sheet of phyllo atop baking sheet. Lightly brush with butter. Layer *a* second sheet ovetop, brush with butter and repeat.
- (12) Later that year, *a* federal grand jury indicted Jackson and Paradies, *a* third man and two companies on 133 counts of bribery, mail fraud and tax evasion.
- (13) The stock market scored *a* fourth day of gains for its best week since November. The Dow Jones Industrial Average rose another 54 points.

In (11) the use of the indefinite article subtly advises the reader that the layer of phyllo to be spread on top of the first one, i.e. a second layer, is not any different from the bottom one, while in (12) the use of the indefinite article reflects the contrast in the extent to which the writer knows or wishes to disclose the identity of crime perpetrators. Two individuals are named, which makes them perfectly identifiable, but the third one is anonymous, i.e. unidentifiable for the reader, which calls for the use of the indefinite article. The use of an indefinite ordinals in (13) may seem more puzzling, but in fact it is fairly straightforward. As has already been noted above, the referent of an indefinite singular nominal belongs to a contextually salient set featuring at least two members but whose upper limit is unknown. Reporting *a fourth day of gains* on the stock market invites thus the inference that the four-day series of heady stock market gains may continue, whilst the definite ordinal would only order the days in the series without intimating anything about the outlook for the future. An even more optimistic inference is invited by the indefinite ordinal usage in the next example:

- (14) In 1975 I was *a* widow raising *an* only son, *a* six-year-old child. In 1976, Brandon and I married. He had two children, two sons. In 1980 we adopted *a* fourth child, our daughter, Lani.

The use of the definite ordinal would order the children by age, i.e. underscore the differences that make them distinct, which, in this case includes also their parentage, whilst referring to the adopted daughter with an indefinite nominal puts her on a par with the other three kids as an equal member of the same set. Ultimately foregoing the use of the definite article contributes thus to expressing an inclusive attitude to the adopted daughter.

Indefinite numerals also help speakers to defocus those items they are not interested in discussing:

- (15) It is, however, a first step in a larger and long-considered strategy to topple a 29-year-old Supreme Court ruling that all children in the United States, regardless of their immigration status, are guaranteed a public education.
- (16) “Our experiment is just a first step toward a whole new strategy,” Kaptchuk says.

The strategy referred to in (15) is complex and possibly requires taking many intermediate stages before it is completed, and the one in (16) is even more elusive, as it is only a goal to be reached in the future. The number of steps needed to achieve the objectives set out in both strategies and the order in which they are to be taken are then quite unlikely to be known in detail yet, which is a perfect scenario for the use of the indefinite article. As noted above, the referent of an indefinite nominal is an explicit member of a set featuring more implicit items of the same kind, which in (15) and (16) translates into a series of steps with only one of them highlighted and the rest remaining in the dark.

The use of definite ordinals would clash with the hazy context by implying that all the steps are already identifiable, while the use of indefinite ordinals lets the speaker remain vague about later developments. An essentially similar motivation underlies the usage illustrated below:

- (17) “We were expecting 40 degrees Celsius, 104 Fahrenheit and sweltering humidity,” said 2004 Olympic road gold medalist Sara Carrigan of Australia, who finished a distant 38th on Sunday.
- (18) For businesses with Chinese interests, perhaps a bigger concern is that Google, the leading search engine around the world, ranks a distant second in the country and reportedly described its revenue there as “immaterial” four years after launching.

Since a singular countable indefinite nominal picks out a single item from a set containing more members of the same kind, it does not really matter if the referent happens to be item number 1, as was the case in (15) and (16) above, or any other one, e.g. item number 38 in (17) and item number 2 in (18). In either scenario the result is that the remaining items in the set are not referred to and remain implicit. In (17) it is only to be expected, given the fact that cyclists who finish road races typically do so in a fast moving pack in which it is difficult for viewers to focus on more than one particular athlete, but in (18) it is more surprising, as top business performers



are usually given enough prominence to be identifiable. However, the choice of the indefinite article in (18) lets the author highlight the point that in his or her opinion it is irrelevant which company did better than Google and which ones did worse. The news is that Google does not top the list, even though given its standing elsewhere in the world, it was a sure favorite to do so in China, too. The use of the definite ordinal would only specify Google's position in the ranking, while the indefinite one lets the author focus on Google and defocus all the other companies in the set as not newsworthy, irrespective of their position in the ranking.

Ultimately, the fact that the winners are defocused as the indefinite ordinals in (17) and (18) make the readers concentrate their attention on the cyclist who finished thirty eighth and the company that ranks second, contributes thus to expressing a sense of disappointment with the performance of either referent and that attitude is further explicated by the use of the adjective *distant*. However, the key role played by indefinite ordinals in voicing such a sentiment in both examples is best brought out by the fact that in COCA there are only 5 instances of definite ordinals modified by that adjective and as many as 137 indefinite ones.

However, the use an indefinite ordinal to defocus a referent may also serve to express quite a positive attitude, e.g.:

- (19) Becoming a landlord has always been a well-worn path to millionaire status, with good reason: Not only does owning properties let you generate a second source of income, your tenants' checks will help you build equity in your investment.

As was the case in (10) above with further arguments advanced in support of a thesis, the use of the definite article to refer to an additional source of cash flow in (19) could trigger the inference that the second source of income is likewise secondary in value and/or importance, i.e. it is less significant than the first/primary one. In a piece of writing that promotes income source diversification an inference playing down the significance of investments would be most unwelcome, though, as it could discourage readers from investing and, consequently, contravene the purpose of the publication. It is no wonder then that the author chose to spotlight income source number two and, consequently defocus income source number one by using an indefinite ordinal.

Finally, indefinite ordinals are also resorted to by speakers who use simple fractions, e.g.:

- (20) Maybe an eighth of a mile off the main road, we found what looked to be an abandoned mine. I parked the van next to a boulder and jumped out as soon as the engine quit.

It goes without saying that every eighth of a mile is exactly the same length, which translates to a scenario in which a set has eight identical members and it does not matter in any way which one of them actually refers to the stretch of the dirt road in (20). Any such case is thus a prime example of exclusive reference and the use of the indefinite article with singular simple fractions is only to be expected.



However, if all members of such a set are not the same because at least one of them is equipped with a feature which makes it uniquely identifiable, the use of the definite article is obviously the rule, e.g.:

- (21) But Personal Ensign, trying to become the first major American thoroughbred in 80 years to go undefeated, wouldn't be denied. She made up four lengths on Winning Colors in the final eighth of a mile and got her nose on the wire a hair before Winning Colors. Personal Ensign retired with 13 wins in 13 starts.

The ordinal numeral in (21) does not refer to a random eighth of a mile on a horse racing track but to the final one, which makes it clearly different from the other ones and requires the use of the definite article. However, as has been documented and argued above, the usage is not warranted by the mere choice of the ordinal numeral, but reflects contextual considerations which rule out the use of the indefinite article.

## 4. Conclusion

In general it may be concluded that indefinite ordinals let speakers focus on one item from a set of numbered entities and refer to their pick independently of its inferable connections with all other set members, which leads to two complementary scenarios. In the first one the referent is implied not to be any different from the remaining set members, which contributes to expressing a neutral, disinterested point of view, as shown in (8)–(14) and (20). In the second scenario one referent is highlighted irrespective of its position in the sequence of numbers while the remaining ones are defocused, which contributes to expressing a point of view that plays down the relevance of the remaining potential referents, as shown in (15)–(19) and 20. In a particular context either viewpoint may be elaborated to express a more specific attitude, as shown in (14), (18), or (19), but what is more crucial, both scenarios outlined above and the viewpoints they give rise to are well rooted in a key aspect of the meaning of the indefinite article.

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