How Verbal Systems Shape Discourse: Cross-Linguistic Perspectives on Albanian, German, and English Tense and Modality

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ABSTRACT:

This article presents a contrastive, discourse-oriented analysis of article systems in Albanian, German, and English, focusing on their role in reference management and the establishment of textual and interactional coherence. Rather than treating articles merely as formal elements of the noun phrase, the study approaches them as linguistic resources that speakers use to introduce, maintain, and negotiate discourse referents. Drawing on text-grammatical and discourse-pragmatic approaches – most notably the distinction between anaphoric and cataphoric article use – the analysis foregrounds accessibility, shared knowledge, and the gradual unfolding of information in discourse.

German represents a morphologically rich system in which articles encode gender, number, and case and occupy a fixed determiner position. Albanian, by contrast, expresses referential accessibility primarily through postposed enclitic definite endings and analytic constructions, while the indefinite article remains invariant. English occupies a typologically reduced position; with largely invariable articles whose interpretation depends heavily on discourse context and pragmatic inference. Despite these structural differences, all three languages employ articles in comparable ways to introduce discourse referents, maintain referential continuity, and activate common ground between speaker and hearer. The study is based on authentic journalistic texts, carefully selected contrastive examples, and reconstructed conversational sequences reflecting everyday communicative practices. The findings demonstrate that article systems operate at the interface of morphology and discourse and should be understood as central mechanisms of referential coherence rather than as purely grammatical markers. By integrating Albanian into a broader German-English contrastive framework, the article contributes to discourse grammar, contrastive linguistics, and current cross-linguistic research on reference.

KEY WORDS: discourse coherence; contrastive linguistics; Albanian; German; English

1. INTRODUCTION

Articles play a central role in how speakers organize reference in discourse. Although they are formally associated with nouns, their function extends far beyond nominal modification. Through article choice, speakers indicate whether a referent is already accessible, newly introduced, or recoverable from prior discourse or shared knowledge. In this way, articles function as subtle but powerful cues that support textual coherence and communicative efficiency.

While article systems in German and English have been described extensively in grammatical, semantic, and pragmatic terms, Albanian remains comparatively underrepresented in international contrastive research. This is particularly striking given the typological distinctiveness of Albanian, especially its system of postposed enclitic definite endings, which differs fundamentally from the preposed determiner systems of German and English. The present article addresses this gap by offering a detailed contrastive analysis of article systems in Albanian, German, and English, with particular attention to how morphological form interacts with discourse-level interpretation.

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The analysis focuses on simple article forms traditionally labeled definite and indefinite, which are treated here in functional terms as anaphoric and cataphoric devices. These forms are examined both with respect to their grammatical realization and their contribution to referential coherence in written texts and spoken interaction. In addition, article-like constructions, such as possessive, demonstrative, quantitative, and identificational expressions, are considered insofar as they interact with or replace simple articles in discourse.

The underlying assumption of this study is that reference cannot be adequately explained at the level of sentence grammar alone. Instead, it emerges from the interaction of grammatical marking, discourse structure, pragmatic inference, and shared cultural knowledge. By moving analytically from morphology to discourse, the article shows how structurally different article systems converge functionally in guiding interpretation and maintaining coherence.

2. METHODOLOGICAL AND CONTRASTIVE FRAMEWORK

The study employs a qualitative, contrastive methodology that integrates grammatical description with discourse-analytic interpretation. Since the primary objective is to examine discourse functions rather than frequency distributions, the analysis is based on a deliberately small and carefully curated corpus, selected to provide context-rich and functionally transparent examples.

The Albanian data consist mainly of journalistic texts drawn from the Kosovar daily newspaper *Koha Ditore*, complemented by selected sequences from public communication. The corpus focuses in particular on narrative reporting and crime news genres, as these text types provide especially favorable conditions for observing the interaction between cataphoric and anaphoric reference.

All Albanian texts were translated by the author into German and English. This controlled translation procedure makes it possible to trace the realization of anaphoric and cataphoric progression across the three languages under comparable discourse conditions, thereby allowing for a systematic identification of linguistic contrasts as well as culturally grounded differences in discourse organization.

3. REFERENCE, ACCESSIBILITY, AND DISCOURSE COHERENCE

Reference in discourse is not a fixed relation between linguistic expressions and extra-linguistic entities, but a dynamic process in which speakers and hearers coordinate attention, expectations, and shared knowledge. Nominal expressions are interpreted against a background of prior discourse, situational context, and culturally established assumptions. Articles play a crucial role in this process by signaling how a noun phrase should be integrated into the evolving discourse model.

The analysis builds explicitly on text-grammatical and discourse-oriented approaches. Weinrich's distinction between anaphoric and cataphoric articles is central, as it treats articles as instructions for discourse processing rather than as purely grammatical markers (Weinrich, 1993, pp. 410–414). Anaphoric articles guide the hearer toward already accessible information, whereas cataphoric articles create expectations for further specification in the subsequent discourse.

In contemporary English linguistics, reference is increasingly modeled in terms of discourse accessibility and cognitive status. Abbott (2010, pp. 65–92) emphasizes that definite descriptions are licensed by pragmatic felicity conditions grounded in shared knowledge. Similarly, Gundel, Hedberg, and Zacharski (2012, pp. 3–24) propose the Givenness Hierarchy, which explains how different linguistic forms – including articles – signal degrees of cognitive accessibility.

Discourse-pragmatic approaches further demonstrate that article choice interacts closely with information structure and discourse organization. Roberts (2012, pp. 45–68) shows that definite noun phrases link referents to the current question under discussion, thereby contributing directly to coherence. Corpus-based and experimental studies confirm that article interpretation is sensitive to discourse prominence and familiarity rather than purely to grammatical form (Schwarz & Simonenko, 2018; Schwarz, 2020).

Accessibility is therefore not limited to explicit textual antecedents. A referent may be accessible because it is situationally present, culturally salient, or inferable from general world knowledge. Article choice is consequently always discourse-sensitive and cannot be accounted for adequately by sentence grammar alone.

4. THE ANAPHORIC ARTICLE IN GERMAN AND ALBANIAN

In German, the anaphoric article is preposed to the noun and forms part of the nominal phrase together with adjectives and the noun. It encodes gender, number, and case and thus plays a central role in marking grammatical relations and ensuring syntactic clarity (Eisenberg, 2013, pp. 217–225). Through this rich inflectional system, German provides multiple formal cues that support referential identification.

Albanian differs fundamentally in this respect. The anaphoric article is postposed and realized as an enclitic definite ending attached to the noun (*djal-i, grua-ja*). These enclitic endings are phonologically bound but syntactically functional and should not be confused with derivational or inflectional suffixes. Adjectives typically follow the noun and are linked by a separate agreement marker (*djali i mirë* 'the good boy'), which shows that referential marking in Albanian is distributed across the noun phrase.

In tabular form, this would appear as follows:

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Numerus	SINGULAR			PLURAL	
Genus ╲ Kasus	MASKULIN	FEMININ	NEUTRUM	M+F+A	
NOMINATIV (Emërore)	**der** Mann burr**i**	**die** Frau grua**ja**	**das** Kind fëmi**ja**	**die**	Männer (burr**at**) Frauen (grat**ë**) Kinder (fëmij**ët**)
AKKUSATIV (Kallëzorja)	**den** Mann burr**in**	**die** Frau grua**n**	**das** Kind fëmi**ja**	**die**	Männer (burr**at**) Frauen (grat**ë**) Kinder (fëmij**ët**)
DATIV (Dhanorja)	**dem** Mann burr**it**	**der** Frau grua**s**	**dem** Kind fëmij**ës**	**den**	Männer**n** (burra**ve**) Frauen (grave) Kinder**n** (fëmij**ëve**)
GENITIV (Gjinorja)	**des** Manne**s** **i(e)** burr**it**	**der** Frau **i (e)** grua**s**	**des** Kinde**s** **i (e)** fëmij**ës**	**der**	Männer (**i/e** burra**ve**) Frauen (**i/e** grave) Kinder (**i/e** fëmij**ëve**)

Fig. 1. The forms of the anaphoric articles in German and Albanian

Preposed definite constructions (*i miri djalë*) are possible but stylistically marked and usually associated with emphasis or expressive discourse contexts (Çeliku, 2009, p. 76). In contemporary Albanian, the neuter gender has largely merged with masculine forms, surviving mainly in nominalized verb constructions (*të folurit*, *të ecurit*) (Demiraj, 2002, pp. 112–115). Case marking further highlights typological contrasts: German marks case morphologically on the article, whereas Albanian relies on a combination of enclitic endings and analytic constructions.

5. THE ANAPHORIC ARTICLE IN ENGLISH

The English anaphoric article *the* is invariant and does not encode gender or case. This formal simplicity, however, does not imply functional simplicity. Contemporary research consistently shows that the English definite article plays a central role in discourse management, signaling that a referent is identifiable within the current common ground.

Standard grammars emphasize that *the* presupposes identifiability for the hearer, even if the referent has not been explicitly mentioned before (Quirk et al., 1985, pp. 265–268; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, pp. 368–372). English makes extensive use of situational and associative anaphora, where identifiability is inferred rather than textually established.

Recent discourse-oriented research highlights the interaction between article use and information structure. Birner and Ward (2014, pp. 3–28) show that reference in English is closely tied to discourse coherence relations, while Roberts (2012) demonstrates how definites integrate referents into the current discourse agenda. More recent semantic-pragmatic work emphasizes the role of familiarity and discourse prominence in definite reference (Schwarz & Simonenko, 2018; Schwarz, 2020).

Taken together, these findings confirm that English relies heavily on pragmatic inference and shared knowledge to compensate for the lack of rich morphological marking. Nevertheless, the communicative outcome is functionally comparable to that found in German and Albanian.

6. THE CATAPHORIC ARTICLE ACROSS ALBANIAN, GERMAN, AND ENGLISH

Cataphoric articles do more than signal indefiniteness. They establish a discourse contract: a referent is introduced as not yet fully identifiable, and the addressee is invited to keep that referent active while awaiting further specification. In this sense, cataphoric marking is a forward-oriented cue for discourse processing, closely linked to information flow, genre conventions, and rhetorical design.

Across Albanian, German, and English, cataphoric articles fulfill this core function, but the three languages distribute the work of referential stabilization differently. German tends to externalize information through morphology; Albanian relies more strongly on discourse progression and delayed enrichment; and English balances syntactic positioning with pragmatic inference. A contrastive analysis must therefore treat the cataphoric article not simply as a determiner form, but as a mechanism of referential planning in discourse.

In Albanian, the cataphoric article is realized by the invariant preposed form *një*. Because *një* does not encode gender or case, cataphoric noun phrases are often underspecified at the moment of introduction. As Çeliku's discourse-based analysis of Albanian and German shows, such introductions are typically designed to be clarified and narrowed step by step through subsequent discourse material (Çeliku, 2009, pp. 78-79). This strategy supports progressive stabilization and is especially characteristic of narrative and journalistic genres, where information is intentionally released in stages.

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German adopts a contrasting strategy. The indefinite article (*ein/eine*) is inflected for gender, number, and case, so a cataphoric noun phrase carries substantial grammatical information at the point of introduction. This inflectional explicitness supports early syntactic structuring and can reduce ambiguity in complex sentences (Eisenberg, 2013, pp. 217–225). From a discourse perspective, Weinrich (1993, pp. 410–414) notes that cataphoric articles are stronger signals than anaphoric ones because they actively shape expectations and direct attention forward in the text.

English occupies an intermediate position. Like Albanian, it uses an invariant indefinite article (*a/an*), but its discourse behavior is shaped by relatively rigid word order and a strong reliance on pragmatic inference. Because English does not encode case on the article, grammatical relations are primarily determined by syntactic position. Discourse-pragmatic research shows that cataphoric indefinites in English often introduce entities that become central to the current discourse agenda (Roberts, 2012, pp.45-68), while the Givenness Hierarchy predicts their initial low accessibility, which must be upgraded through subsequent discourse operations (Gundel et al., 2012, pp. 3-24).

A notable convergence across the three languages concerns plural reference. None has a dedicated plural cataphoric article; plural noun phrases are typically zero-marked. This reflects a shared discourse constraint: plural referents are often introduced as collectives or types rather than as fully individuated entities, inviting later refinement through discourse.

The cataphoric article in the three languages can be presented in tabular form as follows:

Numerus	Singular				Plural
Genus / Kasus	MASKULINUM	FEMININUM	NEUTRUM		M+F+N
Nominativ (Emërore)	**ein** Mann **një** burrë **a** man	**eine** Frau **një** grua **a** woman	**ein** Kind **një** fëmijë **a** child	Ø	Männer (burr**a**, men) Frauen (gra, women) Kinder (fëmijë, children)
Akkusativ (Kallëzore)	**einen** Mann **një** burrë **a** man	**eine** Frau **një** grua **a** woman	**ein** Kind **një** fëmijë **a** child	Ø	Männer (burr**a**, men) Frauen (gra, women) Kinder (fëmijë, children)
Dativ (Dhanore)	**einem** Mann **një** burri **to a** man	**einer** Frau **një** gruaje **to a** woman	**einem** Kind **një** fëmije **to a** child	Ø	Männer*n*(burra**ve**, man) Frauen (gra**ve**, women) Kinder*n*(fëmijë**ve**, children)
Genitiv (Gjinore)	**eines** Manne**s** **i/e një** burri mann'**s**	**einer** Frau **i/e një** gruaje woman'**s**	**eines** Kinde**s** **i/e një** fëmije child'**s**	Ø	Männer(**i/e** burra**ve**, men'**s**) Frauen (**i/e** gra**ve**, women'**s**) Kinder*n*(**i/e** fëmijëve, children'**s**)

Fig. 2. The forms of the cataphoric articles in German, Albanian and English

7. ARTICLES AND TEXTUAL COHERENCE: A CORPUS-BASED CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS

The coherence-building function of articles becomes particularly transparent when they are examined in extended, naturally occurring discourse. In this section, the theoretical distinctions developed earlier are applied to concrete examples drawn from journalistic texts, public communication, and corpus-informed data in Albanian, German, and English. The aim is to show how anaphoric and cataphoric articles operate in real discourse to introduce, stabilize, and maintain referential continuity.

7.1 Albanian: Progressive Identification in Newspaper Discourse

Albanian journalistic texts provide clear illustrations of how cataphoric articles introduce discourse referents that are subsequently specified through anaphoric forms. Consider the following example from a newspaper report:

Alb. **Një person** është vrarë mbrëmë në rrethana ende të paqarta. **I vrari** është dërguar në spital, ku më vonë ka ndërruar jetë. Viktima është **Avni Musa** (42) nga Pozhorani.
(*Koha Ditore*)

Dt. **Eine Person** wurde gestern Abend unter bislang ungeklärten Umständen getötet. **Die getötete Person** wurde ins Krankenhaus gebracht, wo **sie** später verstarb. Das Opfer ist **Avni Musa** (42) aus Pozhorani.

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> Engl. **A person** was killed last night under circumstances that are still unclear. **The killed one** was taken to hospital, where **he** later died. The victim is **Avni Musa** (42) from Pozhorani.

The cataphoric noun phrase *një person* ('a person') introduces a minimally specified discourse referent. At this stage, the referent is not identifiable but functions as an open discourse slot. The subsequent anaphoric expression *i vrari* ('the killed person') signals that the referent has become discourse-accessible, even though full identification has not yet been achieved. Up to this point, it remains unclear whether the referent is male or female. Finally, the proper name *Avni Musa* completes referential stabilization and makes it explicit that the referent is a male**.**

This stepwise progression illustrates what Çeliku (ibidem) describes as progressive specification, a discourse strategy that allows Albanian writers to control information flow and guide the reader's expectations. The enclitic definite ending in *i vrari* plays a crucial role here by marking the referent as already established in the discourse, thereby ensuring coherence across sentence boundaries.

The same discourse progression is observable in the German and English translations, though it is realized through different grammatical means. German marks the transition explicitly through article alternation (*eine Person – die getötete Person*). However, in the translation process, problems arise in the realization of textual coherence**,** because in Albanian the lexeme *person* is grammatically masculine and is subsequently taken up textually by a masculine noun (*i vrari* 'the killed one'), whereas pronominal resumption is not overtly marked on the surface of the text but remains implicit, that is, it operates at the level of mental representation. Thus, pronominal resumption in Albanian functions as a means of textual coherence (Çeliku, 2009, pp. 83–87).

In German, by contrast, the lexeme *Person* is grammatically feminine, and pronominal resumption must obligatorily be realized with the feminine personal pronoun sie, since pronouns in Germanic languages constitute an explicit device of textual cohesion. This can lead to reader confusion, when it ultimately becomes clear that the referent is in fact male.

English, in turn, relies primarily on repetition and pragmatic inference (*a person – the killed one*). Because the English article system does not encode grammatical gender, unlike Albanian and German, the reader is not confronted with ambiguity or misguidance regarding the gender of the killed person**,** as is the case in German. Albanian, by contrast, employs enclitic definite marking (*i vrari*), illustrating its discourse-dependent strategy of progressive referential specification.

7.2 Public Communication: Indirect Reference and Cultural Knowledge

Beyond newspaper discourse, public communication offers further insight into the coherence-building function of articles. In Albanian public interaction, indirect speech acts often rely on shared cultural knowledge rather than explicit referential identification. Consider the following reconstructed example:

> Alb.   **A:** A ke kohë për **një** kafe? (Do you have time for coffee?)
> **B:** Po, kur? (Sure, when?)

Here, the expression *një kafe* ('a coffee') is formally cataphoric but pragmatically does not introduce a concrete referent. Instead, it functions as a conventionalized signal for a social or pragmatic request. The coherence of the exchange depends on shared cultural knowledge rather than on textual reference. In Albanian culture, this expression also implies an intention to establish friendship or, indirectly, a request for a favor, whereas in Western cultures such discourse practices tend to be more direct.

Comparable patterns exist in German and English, though they are less conventionalized. In English, for example, *Let's grab a coffee* similarly relies on pragmatic inference rather than literal reference. These examples show that article choice can contribute to coherence even when reference is indirect or metaphorical.

7.3 Corpus-Based Observations

Corpus-based observations support these qualitative findings. Across Albanian, German, and English corpora, cataphoric articles occur most frequently in genres characterized by structured information release, such as news reports and narratives. Anaphoric articles, by contrast, dominate in discourse segments where referents are already established and need to be maintained rather than introduced.

From a cognitive perspective, this distribution aligns with the Givenness Hierarchy (Gundel et al., ibidem), according to which linguistic forms signal different degrees of accessibility. Cataphoric articles correspond to lower levels of accessibility, while anaphoric articles indicate a higher degree of discourse activation.

8. CONCLUSION

This contrastive analysis has shown that article systems in Albanian, German, and English differ markedly in their morphological realization but converge functionally at the level of discourse. Articles serve as procedural cues that guide reference, regulate accessibility, and support textual and interactional coherence.

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Albanian, with its system of enclitic definite endings and analytic constructions, occupies a typologically distinctive position and offers valuable insights into how reference can be managed without preposed determiners. Integrating Albanian into broader contrastive frameworks thus enriches both descriptive linguistics and contemporary theories of discourse organization.

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