

# The case for weak null in English

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**Abstract.** The concept of the null article in English was originally developed as a means of explaining the apparent paradox that singular nouns with the same surface form, namely the non-presence of a grammatical article, are used in quite different communicative situations. Null has been described as the most definite form in the English article system, standing in direct contrast to zero at the opposite end of a scale. Yet, while this may be applicable in the case of predicate nouns denoting unique roles, certain institutions where the referent is pragmatically unique, or coordinate structures with a preceding referent, there is persuasive evidence to suggest a considerable number of other null structures do not fit such a description but, on the contrary, share common characteristics with the weak form of the definite article or occupy more of a neutral position which would permit insertion of either one of the surface articles. On this basis, a proposal is advanced to acknowledge two forms of the null article, strong and weak, according to context. Rather than a corpus-based statistical approach, this paper draws upon a smaller selection of contemporary, non-fictional texts from a variety of semantic fields to illustrate the points being made.

**Keywords:** null article, weak definite, prepositional phrases, coordinate structures, condensed absolute constructions

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## 1 Introduction

Quirk et al. (1985, 276) identify a variety of grammatical structures in which no surface article appears before a singular countable noun. All these are classified as examples of “the zero article with definite meaning”, which is essentially the basis of the null article

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theory. According to Chesterman (1991) the zero and null articles stand at opposite ends of a scale as shown in Figure 1 below. Chesterman notes an absence of universal agreement concerning the status of unstressed *some*, which is sometimes represented in the literature as *sm* (see, e.g., Lyons 1999, 34): early grammars, such as Christophersen (1939) or Jespersen (1949) do not classify it as an article; however, Yotsukura (1970) and Hawkins (1978) do, on the grounds that it functions as a plural/mass equivalent of the indefinite article.

In terms of their usage, zero is the most indefinite form, applied to mass singular nouns and plural count nouns, whereas null, the most definite form, occurs only with singular count nouns and proper nouns.

most indefinite	<i>zero</i> — <i>a</i> — <i>some</i> — <i>the</i> — <i>null</i>	most definite
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Figure 1. Chesterman (1991, 182)

One of the most common occurrences of the null article is with predicate nominals denoting a unique role, as in example (1) below, where the office of president can have only one occupant at any given time and the null form is an alternative to the definite article.

(1) *Dalia Grybauskaitė was president of Lithuania from 2009 to 2019.*

The definite status of the predicate in such structures is confirmed by the main academic grammars, namely Quirk et al. (1985), Huddleston and Pullum (2002) and Biber et al. (2021). A different perspective is offered by Berezowski (2009), who claims that all predicate nominals are inherently indefinite; he suggests the absence of the article in structures similar to the one above is a consequence of what he refers to *passim* as the “incomplete grammaticalization model”. As this hypothesis is impossible either to confirm or refute, it will not be discussed further here.

That said, there would seem to be reasonable grounds for questioning whether all of Chesterman’s other proposed candidates for null can be considered definite. For instance, Chesterman maintains the null article “indicates that its NP has unlimited extensivity (i.e., names a set),” which would explain why no article is used in two quite different types of expression, prepositional and binomial respectively, as *by plane*, and *like father like son*: rather than identifying any particular member of the sets *plane* or *father and son*, these expressions are said to refer to their “concepts in a more abstract sense” (Chesterman 1991, 83).

Taking this line of the abstract a stage further, another, albeit somewhat peripheral case would be such structures as the following, which Chesterman claims are also instances of null:

- (2) *That's a funny tram – if tram it is / if tram it be / if tram (? a tram) is what you call it.*  
 (3) *Son-in-law he may be / he may call himself, but I'm not having him in this house.*

This is described as a case of “foregrounding (syntactically fronting) the label or name given to the concept or object in question, so that the noun is used in a very abstract sense indeed” (Chesterman 1991, 84). Whether foregrounding alone is sufficient to provide a noun with most definite status seems questionable, given possible alternative paraphrases of (2) in which it becomes clear that the second mention of “tram” refers essentially to the word being used to describe the object rather than the object itself:

- (2) a. *That's a funny tram – if you can call it a tram.*  
 (2) b. *That's a funny tram – if “tram” is the right word for it.*

Be that as it may, the wider point at issue here is that proposing on the one hand that null is the most definite of article forms, then on the other claiming it can refer to concepts in a “a very abstract sense indeed” might suggest rather too wide a range of uses is being attributed to one grammatical form. As the various subcategories of null increase in number to embrace an expanding variety of NPs, there could be a danger of negating any benefits that might be accrued by applying the zero vs. null distinction in the first place. If taken to extremes, null would effectively become zero with the sole difference that plural forms are excluded.

Yoo (2009) notes that although the concept of null has received little attention in ESL/EFL grammars, nevertheless “the use of null in sentences where learners of English might expect a surface article is an area that can be given more attention.” It is with this in mind that the current paper aims to offer an alternative interpretation of some null structures. Two authors who have covered the concept of null in some detail are Dušková (1997) and Master (1997), both of whom suggest certain modifications to Chesterman’s original theory. These will be incorporated into the discussion following a brief overview of null article structures as presented in the leading academic grammars.

## 2 Structures favouring the null article

In addition to the aforementioned predicate nouns with unique reference, Quirk et al. identify the following categories of zero article with definite meaning:

- a. institutions of human life and society (*in bed, at church*)
- b. means of transport and communication (*by bus, by telephone*)
- c. times of day and night (*at dawn, after nightfall*)
- d. seasons (*in spring*)
- d. illnesses
- e. parallel structures (*back to back, husband and wife*)
- f. fixed prepositional phrases (*in turn, out of step*)

With specific reference to parallel structures, the authors suggest that “[i]t can be argued that the nouns have no article because they have largely lost their independent nominal status” and phrases such as *face to face* or *man to man* are “virtually idioms exemplifying ‘frozen’ article use”. At the same time, they note the productive nature of parallel structures involving coordination, as in (4) below, where the insertion of the definite article is optional.

(4) *The birth took place this morning, and both (the) mother and (the) child are doing well.*

Biber et al. (2021, 262–264) offer a similar list of “special cases” of zero article noun phrases, proposing in advance that: “Arguably some of these cases should be analysed as involving neutralization of article distinctions, rather than cases of zero article. What is important to note is that these structures involve nouns which in other contexts behave as ordinary countable nouns.” They do not specify in which cases the distinction would apply; however, for the most part their categories correspond to those of Quirk et al. They differ inasmuch as there is no mention of illnesses or fixed prepositional phrases; on the other hand, they add block language (of the type found in news headlines where articles are frequently omitted) and vocatives. These, however, will not be discussed here. With regard to parallel structures, it is merely noted that “there is a great deal of variation depending on the individual collocation”.

Huddleston and Pullum (2002, 409–410) do not use the term zero article but refer instead to “Restricted non-referential interpretations of bare NPs”, which they divide into two main categories: (a) bare role NPs (corresponding to predicates with unique roles); and (b) Fixed expressions or frames. The latter category contains seven sub-groups:

- i activities linked to locations (*Ed is in hospital / went to school / went off stage.*)
- ii indications of status (*They are out of place / off target / on call.*)
- iii transport and media (*We went by bicycle / communicate by email.*)
- iv meals (*We had lunch on the terrace.*)
- v times (*at dawn, by daybreak, before sunrise*)
- vi repeated nouns (*arm in arm, back to back, day after day, side by side, mile upon mile*)
- vii matched nouns (*from father to son, from beginning to end, between husband and wife*)

The distinction between fixed expressions and fixed frames is a useful one, which will assist in justifying the exclusion of some prepositional phrases from an analysis of null article usage. The next section will apply this principle to two examples taken from Master (1997).

### 3 Fixed phrases

Master would classify as non-count – and hence unable to take null – certain bare nouns in set phrases in which the absence of an article “does not evoke the substantive in the same way as it does when the article is present”, which appears to be synonymous with the concept of a loss of independent nominal status as referred to above. Two of the examples he gives involving prepositions – *at bay* and *on edge* – are worth examining in more detail, each for a different reason: a distinction needs to be made firstly between phrases which would appear to function more in the sense of participle constructions than locatives and, secondly, between phrases whose meaning may be either literal or figurative.

#### 3.1 Participle constructions

The phrase *at bay*, paraphrased by Master as “away”, is most frequently found in the collocation “keep at bay” and it highlights a feature inherent in some other “at” phrases which essentially function not as locatives but rather as present participles: historically, warning signs on construction sites, where the labourers were exclusively male, might read “Men at work” or, alternatively, “Men working”, with no difference in meaning (cf. also *hard at work* ~ *working hard*). Huddleston and Pullum note the similarity of the *at work* or *at play* construction to the phrases in the ‘indications of status’ sub-category mentioned above, suggesting these indicate “whether or not someone is available or engaged in their proper activity”. Similar examples to this include *at rest* or *at worship*. The nouns here are non-count and not open to internal qualification or modification; as such they will be classed as fixed expressions and not included in a null article analysis.

The case of “school”, although it can function as a verb is different: the collocation *at school* cannot be paraphrased as “schooling”. Thus, despite a superficial similarity at surface level, there are significant differences between *at school* and *at work*, the major one being that “school” is a countable noun in a way that “work” in this sense is not. Secondly, “school” can accept the insertion of various adjectival modifiers in the bare NP, providing the reference is to an officially designated type of school as opposed to a subjective qualitative assessment of it. The distinction is apparent in (5):

- (5) *Joel had grown up in public housing and gone to a tough school [...] He had completed law school and undertaken many high-status, high paying jobs.* (JG 252)

Thus in “She’s at \_\_\_ school”, the gap could be filled with one of several alternatives (*primary, secondary, art, boarding, business, law, night, Sunday*); in the case of “work”, however, no such option is available. From this perspective, *at school* may be regarded as a fixed frame containing a singular countable noun which allows for adjectival modification; therefore it is eligible for inclusion in a null analysis.

### 3.1.2 Fixed prepositional phrases

The meaning of *on edge* in the sense of “irritable, nervous” is not immediately decipherable from the words themselves. Where such idioms are concerned, an analysis in terms of definiteness would be unhelpful, especially in this particular case where insertion of the definite article would produce a legitimate phrase, but one with a quite different sense, which may be either literal or figurative (cf. *on the edge of the kerb* vs. *on the edge of disaster*). Individual collocation and context will determine which reading is more appropriate, including in situations where the stylistic omission of a determiner leads to the literal meaning resembling the more commonly used figurative one at surface level. In the case of *in hand* below, in (6) and (7) it represents a fixed expression, meaning “under control” and “having played one game fewer” respectively; in (8), however, it refers literally to a rugby league player in possession of the ball and, given the possibility of internal modification (cf. *with the ball in his hand*) it will be considered a fixed frame.

- (6) *The police arrived and soon had the situation in hand.*
- (7) *Leigh Leopards are two points behind the league leaders with a game in hand.*
- (8) *It's when Hodgson chimes into the attacking line with ball in hand that he is at his best.* (RW, 24)

## 4 Null structures

This section will follow the categories suggested by Quirk et al. (1985, 277), using those items which are most relevant to the discussion.

### 4.1 Institutions

Although the examples in the academic grammars contain prepositions, the null form can be found with nouns in both subject and direct object position.

- (9) *This week Parliament has voted to reject both the withdrawal deal that Prime Minister Theresa May negotiated with the EU, and the possibility of leaving the EU without a deal.* (MM)
- (10) *For the first time in Kenya's history, Parliament has voted to reject a presidential order, duly noted in the official Gazette.* (AC)
- (11) *Biden told Congress that he wants to sign legislation overhauling controversial policing practices by May 25, the anniversary of the murder of George Floyd.* (ST)
- (12) *Angela Rayner has just told Congress that it's a “cast-iron commitment” that Labour will introduce an Employments Rights Bill within the first 100 days of entering office.* (GT)

Even without further background information, a pragmatic interpretation of (9) and (10) suggests two quite different parliaments are being referred to, those of the United Kingdom and Kenya respectively. Likewise in (11) and (12), the Congress in question is not the same: in the first instance it is the political institution in the USA; in the second it refers to the annual meeting of the British Trade Union movement. The inference to be drawn from this is that cultural context may play a role in article usage. Chesterman, adopting the terminology of Allen and Hill (1979), refers to the “insider locus” sense of the null article, whereby “it is pragmatically unnecessary to mark forms which are already ‘conceptually clear’ in some sense without the necessity for a surface article” (Chesterman 1991, 182). The null form with “Parliament” will have different associations depending on the country – or at least the socio-cultural setting – in which it is being used. This explanation has much in common with the idea of “community membership” (Stvan 1998, 28) being a determining factor in some bare NPs. Stvan’s data indicates that the collocations *in studio*, *on property* and *in kitchen* (with reference to a chef) were “acceptable for speakers who were participants in the subcommunities that attend these places regularly”. It is practically impossible to predict precisely which nouns may function like this; however, understanding the motivation behind such null forms is important for their interpretation as and when they do occur.

#### 4.1.1 Quasi-locatives

Prior to their discussion of the zero article with definite meaning, Quirk et al. (1985, 269) introduce the concept of “sporadic reference” where the definite article is used in connection with institutions of human society. This designation is based on the premise that “reference is made to an institution which may be observed recurrently at various places and times”. There are two possible interpretations to their example cited below: it is theoretically possible that every visit is to one and the same venue; however, it is equally plausible that the sister is attending performances at various theatres, in which case it is the institution which is of greater import than a specific building.

(13) *My sister goes to the theatre every month.*

The term “quasi-locatives” represents an extension of this concept, the major difference being that the definite article has been removed. The authors explain it thus: “[a]lthough they appear to have locative meaning, their function is rather more abstract. In such contexts, nouns such as *college*, *church*, etc do not refer to actual buildings or places, but to the institutions associated with them.” However, in a footnote on the same page, the authors add that the article is sometimes left out also when the reference is to the building, not the institution, as in:

(14) *She’s at church, arranging flowers.*

Here an abstract sense of church cannot apply since one quite specific church is being referred to. Therefore, rather than sporadic, this is of a situationally unique reference, indicating the subject of the sentence is currently engaged in a task at a particular church which, by implication, is known to the speaker but need not necessarily be familiar to the listener. As with Chesterman's "most definite" and "very abstract sense", asserting that the "zero article with definite meaning" can function in a "rather more abstract" way seems to hint at the existence of two discrete forms of null, one of which is less definite than the other. The difference can be illustrated by the following examples:

- (15) *Even if one or both of you are divorced, there may be a way for you to marry in church, but you will need to talk to your vicar as soon as possible.* (CE)
- (16) *Please be encouraged that you don't have to attend church to get married in a church.* (DC)
- (17) *We didn't see the alderman in church this morning.*
- (18) *One of Merkel's first memories was of her mother crying in church as the wall was being built.* (CM 15)

The null locative construction with *church* in (15) is widely used and could equally well occur with the second mention of *church* in (16). Inclusion of the indefinite article here is by no means incongruous, although one effect it does have is to imply the first mention in the same sentence is similarly indefinite, as also is *church* in the preceding (15). The 'insider' view implicit in (17) does not preclude the possibility of the alderman having attended another church on the given day; simply he was not present at the specific church to which the speaker is referring. In (18) it is reasonable to assume the mother was crying in one specific church building, albeit one not necessarily familiar to the reader. Here, from Frau Merkel's inner locus perspective, the reference is definite; for the reader on the outside, it is more a case of "in a church somewhere". Essentially, it makes little difference in terms of effective communication: the outsider understands the content of the message without any need for a follow-up question "Which church?" The main point to be drawn from this is that in terms of expressing definiteness, some NPs may be open to more than one interpretation.

#### 4.1.2 Sporadic reference and weak definites

The underlying concept of weak definites stems from what had been previously described by Quirk et al. as "sporadic reference" involving the definite article with reference to institutions. The term "weak definites" was introduced by Birner and Ward (1994) and Poesio (1994), and subsequently adopted by, amongst several others, Carlson and Sussman (2005), Carlson et al. (2006), Aguilar-Guevara and Zwarts (2011), Klein (2011), Aguilar-Guevara (2014) and Williams (2019). The relevance of weak definites

to some instances of null article usage consists in how they exhibit certain common features with bare NPs by not expressing uniqueness in a given context. In (19), for instance, *the corner* could theoretically refer to any one of four in a traditional room:

(19) *The teacher told the disobedient pupil to go and stand in the corner of the room.*

In the classroom itself, the teacher's order may be accompanied by a gesture in a specific direction, but a subsequent description of the incident to someone who had not witnessed it first-hand would be perfectly intelligible even without the body language; in other words, no clarification of which particular corner is required for a clear understanding of the message. Similarly, in the following two examples, no specific church nor any specific hostelry is being referred to.

(20) *She always goes to church on Sunday, no matter where she's staying.*

(21) *He always goes to the pub on a Friday night, even when he's away on a business trip.*

An example from Schwarz (2014) illustrates the point from an American perspective, though in British English, which differentiates between the status of a patient and a visitor, "hospital" here would be without the definite article.

(22) *Every accident victim ended up in the hospital for weeks. In fact, most of them ended up having to be treated in several different hospitals because of complications with their various injuries.*

Given the possibility of two different readings, definite and indefinite, of the same null construction, it seems reasonable to propose the null article be divided into a strong and weak version, the former being located systematically between the two surface articles as shown in the diagram below. Unstressed *some* has been omitted from the paradigm since the focus here is on null, which can only occur with singular nouns.

Indefinite	Neutral	Definite
<i>zero</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>weak null</i>
	<i>the</i>	<i>strong null</i>

Figure 2. Proposed position of weak null

Concluding their section on sporadic reference with institutions, Quirk et al. note that a similar phenomenon can also occur with means of transport and communication, a point which will be discussed in detail in the next section.

## 4.2 Means of transport and communication

English contains a considerable number of prepositional phrases consisting of *by* plus a bare singular countable noun. In addition to the means of transport and communication specified in the academic grammars cited above, there also exist such commonly used collocations as *by day*, *by hand*, *by heart*, *by mistake*, and several more. Tollet (2023) suggests the existence of a counterexample in *by a miracle*, where inclusion of the indefinite article is standard idiomatic usage, gives reason to question whether the status of the noun in other *by* collocations can automatically be regarded as definite in the way Chesterman proposes. Another such instance with the indefinite article is [*win*] *by a fluke* (cf. also *trial by jury* ~ *be tried by a jury*).

Dušková (1997) states that the null article operates only in cases of “a countable singular expressing nongeneric definite reference, against the background of, or possible alternation with, the definite article”. However, this interpretation creates certain complications with prepositional phrases, including those referring to means of transport. Dušková is aware of the problem, noting that in *go by bus* the reference is more to the means of conveyance than one particular bus. This is in line with Hewson (1972, 127), who states the zero article in *by car* is based on the difference between continue and unit usage: “a car” represents a unit, “car” on its own in the bare NP denotes the means of travel rather than a specific vehicle. Dušková, however, adopts a different perspective and, employing the terminology applied by Quirk et al. to certain parallel structures, suggests the noun in these prepositional phrases no longer carries “its independent nominal status” and therefore represents a case of neither zero nor null, but instead “no article” or “articleless”. The latter term is presumably based on Dušková (1994, 80), where the Czech *bezčlenost*, literally “articlelessness” is used in connection with null structures. Dušková suggests the Czech equivalents to English *by* constructions support her argument, given that in some cases these may be pure adverbials, in others nouns in the instrumental case: thus, for example, the adverbial *letecky* (*by air*) exists along with the inflected noun form *letadlem* (*by plane*). However, the idea of a loss of status in idioms involving transport seems open to question. The Czech language lacks grammatical articles, which effectively means *jet autobusem* has at least four potentially acceptable renderings in English, to wit *go by bus*, *go on the bus*, *take the bus* or *take a bus*. It is not immediately obvious why the absence of a surface article should change the perception of the noun so radically, compared to when the article is present. From a Czech perspective this would imply that nouns in the instrumental case have somehow lost their independent nominal status, which intuitively seems odd. As mentioned in 2.1.2 above, there is good reason to remove altogether some fixed prepositional phrases from an article analysis, but it is hard to see why those involving public transport, transparent as they are, should be among them.

Master (1997), on the other hand, rather than create a separate category, would reclassify *by car* as zero on the grounds that no specific car is identified; hence a paraphrase would include *a* rather than *the* (“by means of a car”). This, however, seems to be an oversimplification. Referring back to sporadic use of the definite article, Quirk et al. offer an example with means of transport in which either the definite or indefinite article may be used.

(23) *Mary took the bus/the train to London. OR: a bus/a train*

This is important inasmuch as it demonstrates how a paraphrase of a *by* construction which involves a different preposition could take either a definite or indefinite article depending on the wider context. The following sentence may serve as an example:

(24) *I came home from school on the Friday and was sent to bed early as we left Leeds at 11.30 p.m. to travel down by car. (DH 63)*

Firstly, if the car in question belonged to the writer’s family, the most natural paraphrase would be *travel down in the car*, the definite article invariably being used when referring to one’s own private vehicle and, if the family had only one car at their disposal, the *by car* construction would be case of strong null. Secondly, if *car* in this sentence were substituted by *train*, the alternative to *by train* would be *on the train*, although this would be a weak definite since the writer was heading to a destination served by several trains a day and passengers would be able to select any one of these. Given that *on the train* is a weak definite in this context, it seems logical to propose that *by train* be analogously classified as weak null. As a matter of convention, the definite article seems to be preferred with *go on* collocations linked with public transport running to a fixed schedule along a predetermined route. Taxis, however, are different in this respect: in the context of (24) above, one could say *travel down in a taxi*, where use of the indefinite article suggests that the paraphrase *by taxi* would represent another case of weak null.

To sum up this section: all three of the following sentences would be grammatically acceptable; however, there is potentially a nuanced difference between the first two:

- (25) *Could we go to Antakalnis on a trolleybus?*  
 (26) *Could we go to Antakalnis on the trolleybus?*  
 (27) *Could we go to Antakalnis by trolleybus?*

Example (25) might imply some uncertainty on the speaker’s part as to whether or not trolleybuses operated at all to the desired destination, whereas (26) would suggest the speaker is more familiar with the municipal transport system and knows there is a trolleybus service available; here the question possibly hints at a preference for this mode

of transport as opposed to, say, walking, and is an example of a weak definite, assuming there is not just one solitary vehicle operating the service. The version with *by* in (27) may be used in the sense of either (25) or (26). Treating (27) as a case of weak null would preserve the overarching concept of null and remove the need to recategorise selected items which do not fit the original ('strong') null parameters as adverbials or using the somewhat vacuous term 'no article' to describe them.

## 5 Parallel structures

Although the examples of coordinate structures in the literature tend to be primarily binomials (in addition to the academic grammars cited here, see also Dušková & Klégr 2003), they may contain more than two items. A typical example of this would be "act as judge, jury and executioner", which is used in the sense of one and the same person assuming sole power and responsibility for all stages of a process. Here the predicate nouns denoting unique roles in the given context are instances of strong null.

Although similar collocations are often referred to as fixed structures, they are not completely frozen and do allow a certain degree of flexibility in terms of internal modification; hence they may be considered fixed frames as described earlier in this paper. The tennis umpire's traditional "game, set and match" call is another example of strong null, the reference in the given situation being to one specific game, set and match. This same phrase is also used figuratively in the sense of a complete and comprehensive victory, as shown in its purest form in (28), followed by a modified version in (29). Both of these are examples of strong null.

- (28) *In December 1991, after a European Union summit in Maastricht that laid the foundations for a single currency, Britain's prime minister, John Major, returned home saying he had won "game, set and match for Britain" by securing an opt-out. (GMS)*
- (29) *If Angela Merkel were a tennis fan she might have been tempted to say game, set, though not quite match, when she met Nicolas Sarkozy in Paris on Monday. (NW)*

However, not all coordinate structures can be considered definite. Significantly, Dušková and Klégr (2002) represents a relaxing of Dušková's earlier (1997) framework, cited in 3.2 above, in order to allow for the inclusion of null forms in coordinate structures which are clearly generic, as in the following two examples (highlighting in the original).

- (30) *Even in normal circumstances, the relationship between **coach and pupil** is an intense one, modelled on the potent template of **master and apprentice**.*

- (31) *Knowledge is transmitted in social contexts, through relationships, like those of **parent and child**, or **teacher and pupil**, or classmates, that are defined in the value systems and ideology of the culture.*

In fact, generic references are not the only instances which lend themselves to an indefinite interpretation. Two adjacent examples from Dušková and Klégr's list, ((132) and (133) in the original), illustrate the difference between a pragmatic indefinite and definite interpretation respectively:

- (32) *Sark has neither **town nor village**.*  
 (33) *Neither **author nor subject** came well out of the reviews of Nicholas Ind's biography of Terence.*

In (34) the reference is to two specific individuals who have been identified by name earlier in the legal report and both nouns could be preceded by the definite article, making this an instance of strong null. By way of contrast, in (35) the pairing *brother and sister* is used in the traditional labour movement sense of "comrades" and refers to working people as a whole; thus it is a case of weak null.

- (34) *The conflict between brother and sister was apparently so intense that all communications from that point forward were to be made through an intermediary, Ed Hamlet, an attorney from Memphis, Tennessee. (MV)*  
 (35) *Halving council funding, while councils have the same responsibilities to citizens, is calculated to create conflict between brother and sister. (GW)*

In the three examples below, the items listed in each parallel structure are associated with the same semantic field: writing accessories in (36), bathroom fittings in (37) and some typical features of a functioning, self-contained community in (38). All of these nouns are first-time mentions and if an article were to be inserted before any of them, it would be indefinite, thus qualifying them for weak null status.

- (36) *This young lad was collecting autographs and had provided himself with book, pen, pencil and rubber. (MB 272)*  
 (37) *If you turned right there was a bathroom with bath, sink and loo – no shower, it was all very basic. (DF 18)*  
 (38) *A whole society grew up, complete with postal service, police force, magazine and library. (JW 92)*

The same structure with surface articles omitted can also occur following 'without':

- (39) *Up steps Patch Walker, eyes narrowed into the wind and rain. Clint Eastwood in "A Fistful of Dollars" but without poncho and desert and cheroot. (TH 214)*

Here the three items in the parallel structure could be preceded by either the indefinite or definite article with no change in meaning. The difference would be rather one of perspective: the indefinite article would imply a certain lack of background knowledge of the characteristic settings of Spaghetti Westerns involving this actor; the definite article would be immediately comprehensible to connoisseurs of the genre. Given the possibility of both a definite and indefinite interpretation, this may serve as a model example of the neutralisation of articles.

## 6 Absolute clauses

Quirk et al. (1985, 1120) define absolute clauses as “[n]onfinite and verbless adverbial clauses [...] so termed because they are not explicitly bound to the matrix clause syntactically”. Todorova (2013) notes one typical absolute structure is that which follows the pattern (*with*) + *NP* + *participial or adverbial phrase*, the parenthesised *with* indicating that the preposition may be omitted. Examples given by Quirk et al. support this: (40)–(42) would all permit the insertion of *with* to introduce the absolute clause.

- (40) *No further discussion arising, the meeting was brought to a close.*  
 (41) *Lunch finished, the guests retired to the lounge.*  
 (42) *Christmas then only days away, the family was pent up with excitement.*

One aspect which has received little attention in the literature on absolute clauses is article usage in such structures. An exception is Gordon and Krilova (1964, 48) who note the possibility of omitting determiners in absolute clauses such as (43). They suggest such instances in which both the preposition *with* and articles are absent may be referred to as “condensed absolute constructions”.

- (43) *She was just entering the train and the conductor preceded her, ticket in hand.*

Strictly speaking, it would be more accurate to describe these structures as “determinerless”, a term taken from Baldwin et al. (2006), since in several cases, especially where parts of the body are involved, the optional insertion of a possessive form would be more idiomatic than an article. In (44) and (45), the relevant noun in the CA construction has not been previously mentioned in the discourse; native speaker intuitions suggest that, were a determiner to be introduced, the most appropriate item would be possessive *his*.

- (44) *I remember feeling that the visit to the dressing-room of a senior committee man, watch-chain dangling, smacked of a Dickensian mill-owner’s visit to a shop-floor.*  
 (MB 68)  
 (45) *He had been struggling for some time with a knee injury and Bradshaw, business head firmly in place, decided that to retain him was an unjustifiable risk.* (JW 39)

In cases where insertion of an article would be reasonable, it need not always be definite. In (46), the natural alternative to a possessive form would be the indefinite article, since the definite form would have no prior point of reference. In (47) there is a case of strong null as the reference is to one specific line-up; in (48) *blond bouffant* could be either indefinite or definite: in the latter case the recipient of the information is required to identify the anaphoric reference to Rod Stewart's hairstyle.

- (46) *Camel coat on, he gave his daughter, serving pies in the kitchen, a hug and went to join the team bus outside.* (TH 143)  
 (47) *Team revealed, Cain was back in the side.* (TH 363)  
 (48) *Derek Beaumont's parents and grandmother are present; his 65-year-old father one of the foremost Rod Stewart tribute acts in the country by all accounts, blond bouffant to match.* (TH 393)

A hybrid example is offered by (49), in which the definite article before “briefs”, as opposed to a zero plural, could be seen as highlighting this item more than the mobile, which is more of an aside here. True, this interpretation is speculative but sometimes, where a choice of determiners exists, including their absence, stylistic considerations may play a role.

- (49) *As a break from sitting at a desk, I liked to sit on the bed, mobile in easy reach, with the briefs to be read in piles around me.* (JG, 280)

As can be seen also in (43) above, when the CA contains two singular countable nouns, the determiner may be omitted in both:

- (50) *I can hand on heart say it was the first time I had smiled since 12th February.* (DF 201)

Here, the CA is a more succinct way of expressing “with my hand on my heart” in the sense of “sincerely”. Such phrases are examples of fixed frames inasmuch as they will permit a degree of internal modification, as shown in (51) where the CA construction could be expanded to “with his tongue very much in his cheek” in the sense of “facetiously”.

- (51) *Whatever happened to Volodymyr Zelensky? “His comedy career has gone downhill. No shows, no specials – he doesn't even have his own podcast,” tutted his compatriot and fellow comic Anton Tymoshenko, tongue very much in cheek.* (TS)

The examples below demonstrate that there are various options for potential determiners.

- (52) *'It's not a nice night,' he says, pint in hand* (TH 20)  
 (53) *'She's enjoyed it, you can tell,' reports a young Asian mum, woolly-hatted babe in one arm, cell phone in the other.* (TH 208)  
 (54) *Ball in hand, Bulldogs were lively enough, but they couldn't get ball in hand anywhere near often enough.* (TH 393)

In (52) *pint* could take the indefinite article, while the second noun shares common ground with a weak definite: the possessive *his* could be inserted before the body part without implying the gentleman in question has only one hand. In (53) with no previous mention of either infant or phone, insertion of indefinite articles before these two nouns would be quite acceptable. The CA in (54) is a typical expression from rugby league, a game in which the ball is handled more than kicked: *ball in hand* is frequently used by radio commentators as a synonym for “in possession of the ball”, possibly because the visual imagery is more vivid. The paraphrase with “possession” indicates the definite status of “ball”, of which there is only one legally in play at any given moment. This example is of additional interest in demonstrating the flexibility of English: in the second clause, the CA has been converted into a bare NP, which indicates the creative potential of the language with such constructions.

## 7 Concluding remarks

The null article as originally proposed is the most definite form when used with proper names and predicate nouns denoting a unique role. However, attempts to accommodate various other null forms within the same framework fail because of counterexamples which lack any sense of uniqueness. This is particularly true where null in prepositional phrases is open to a more general interpretation as opposed to referring to one specific instance; problems also arise with generic references in coordinate structures. Including such cases under a description of zero article with definite meaning is not an ideal solution; instead they are perhaps best viewed as instances of a certain blurring of article divisions. As is so often the case with grammatical articles, context plays a major role in deciding which form is most appropriate. A division of null into a strong and weak version would preserve the overarching concept of null, whilst enabling the accommodation of ambiguous prepositional phrases, as well as other constructions which are evidently not definite by nature, or which at best occupy some fuzzy neutral ground which allows the possibility of both a definite and indefinite reading.

## Abbreviations

CA – condensed absolute

NP – noun phrase

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