

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 ILLUSTRATION OF THE PHENOMENON

The phenomenon that lies at the heart of this dissertation involves the variable use of the definite article in nominal expressions in the base dialects of the northeast of the Netherlands and northwest of Germany, specifically in the provinces of Groningen and Drenthe in the Netherlands as well as in the region of East Frisia in Germany. The definite article is considered a grammatical characteristic of the core European languages from an areal-typological standpoint, although “their forms and syntactic behavior show considerable diversity” (HASPELMATH 2001: 1494); nonetheless, we can observe that they are conspicuously missing in North Low Saxon dialects based on the examples in (1)–(6) from the dialects of Groningen, taken from TER LAAN (1953).

- (1) *om Ø toavel tou zitten* (TER LAAN 1953: 98)
‘to sit around the table’¹
- (2) *Ø Ledder staait tegen Ø muur aan* (TER LAAN 1953: 98)
‘The ladder is against the wall’.
- (3) *(’t) Peerd löpt in ’t laand* (TER LAAN 1953: 35)
‘The horse is running in the field’.
- (4) *Ø Woagen kwam tot stilstand* (TER LAAN 1953: 101)
‘The wagon came to a stop’.
- (5) *Ø Swaalfkes bin der al weer* (TER LAAN 1953: 35)
‘The swallows are there again’.
- (6) *Ø Zun schient* (TER LAAN 1953: 35)
‘The sun is shining’.

Each of these examples show that the definite article is absent in contexts, in which we might otherwise expect them as the English translations show. It can be absent with singular nouns as in (1)–(4) and (6), but also with plural nouns such as in (5). Moreover, we see that the definite article can be absent regardless of the gender of the noun, despite the fact that neuter nouns such as in (3) tend to occur with the definite article more often than nouns of the common gender as in (1)–(2), (4), and (6).² Syntactically, we can observe how the definite article can be absent in

1 Here and in what follows, the translations into English are our own unless otherwise noted. The dialect examples were often translated with the help of dialect dictionaries from eWND.
2 Common gender is a grammatical gender in Low Saxon; it is the result of a syncretism between historically masculine and feminine nouns. In addition to common gender, Low Saxon dialects also have a neuter gender (TER LAAN 1953, LINDOW et al. 1998).

adpositional phrases such as *om toavel tou* ‘around the table’ and *tegen muur* ‘against the wall’ in examples (1)–(2), but that it can also be absent at the beginning of the sentence in subject function such as in *ledder* ‘ladder’ in (2), *woagen* ‘wagon’ in (4), *zwaalfkes* ‘swallows’ in (5), and *zun* ‘sun’ in (6). We can further observe that some of the nouns refer to unique entities such as in (6), but that this does not have to be the case. For example, nominal expressions that are not necessarily identifiable for the listener based on world knowledge but perhaps based on visibility in a situation can also lack a definite article as in *ledder* ‘ladder’ in (2). In the course of this study, we will see that there is considerable intra- and interspeaker variation involved. For example, in (3), the speaker uses the neuter singular of the definite article *t* optionally at the beginning of the sentence, but then it is used later in the sentence. From this observation, we can conclude that speakers potentially vary within the same stretch of speech. Since the linguistic competence of every speaker is necessarily different (e.g. SCHMIDT 2010a), we can conclude from intraindividual variation that there is also necessarily interindividual variation. Thus, the occurrence of the definite article is not so easily describable because it appears to be contingent upon a multitude of complex, interacting factors.

1.2 LABELS FOR THE PHENOMENON

Scholars have made reference to this phenomenon under different designations in the extant literature. In the more recent literature, it has been called “*de*-deletie” ‘*de*-deletion’ (APOTHEKER 1980), “*lidwoorddeletie*” ‘article-deletion’ (Oosterhof 2008a, Van Oosterhout 1985), “*nullidwoord*” ‘zero article’ (WIERENGA 1984), “*definiter Nullartikel*” ‘definite zero article’ (PHEIFF 2017). *De*-deletion and article-deletion both suggest that a definite article should be present in a sentence even though it is not. Certainly, the use of these labels might be due to a comparison to related varieties such as Standard Dutch, Standard German, or other related dialects in which there is a definite article; thus, their use might be *contrastively* motivated. Furthermore, *de*-deletion is off the mark since it refers exclusively to the common gender form of the definite article *de*; however, the neuter form of the definite article *t* can also be absent as in (3) above. The labels zero article and definite zero article are problematic because it is a contentious issue as to whether there is even such a thing as a “zero article” (cf. KOLDE 1996: 31, PÉRENNEC 1993, VATER 2002: 621, VAN DE VELDE 2010). We would specifically avoid speaking of a “zero article” since it presupposes structure (see HOPPER 1988). It should therefore be stressed that if these terms are encountered at any point in the following discussion, for example in Chapter 4, then the use of these terms should not be understood as implying any of the underlying assumptions discussed above. Instead, if we make use of the terms, it is to facilitate the discussion of other works by retaining their terminology. In what follows, we will prefer to neutrally refer to the definite

article's presence or absence, of the definite article's variable use, or, in the case of the definite article's absence, of "zero variants", especially in Chapter 6.³

1.3 RECENT STUDIES

In what follows, we will focus on recent studies with regard to the use of definite articles in continental West Germanic varieties from a variationist standpoint.⁴ With regard to the study of definite articles in German, our impression is that recent studies with some kind of variationist approach have mostly focused on the emergence of the definite article in Old High German (e.g. PASQUES 2011, KRAISS 2014, SCHLACHTER 2015, SZCZEPANIAK / FLICK 2015, FLICK 2019), on *Präposition-Artikel-Enklisen* in historical and regional varieties of German (e.g. CHRISTIANSEN 2012, 2016, CONIGLIO / SCHLACHTER 2014, KRIER 2002, NÜBLING 1998, 2005, SCHIERING 2005, SCHROEDER 2006, STEFFENS 2012), on the use of definite articles with names (BÖSIGER 2021, SCHMUCK / SZCZEPANIAK 2014, WERTH 2014, 2015 2017, 2020).⁵ Further, BARTON / KOLB / KUPISCH (2015) examine differences with regard to the use of the article in generic expressions in regiolects of German and ULBRICH / WERTH (2017) examined how definite article clitics are processed. Still others such as DIRANI (2020) and WEISS / DIRANI (2019: 313–330), for example, have recently investigated double article paradigms in South Hessian dialects (Section 2.1). There has also been work on article omission in German newspaper headlines (REICH 2017).

There has been comparatively little variationist work on Dutch. With regard to the emergence and development of the definite article in the history of Dutch we can find few studies in general (e.g. VAN DER HORST 2003, 2008, ZONNEVELD 2001). More generally, VAN DE VELDE (2010) has recently argued that the determiner is an emergent (à la HOPPER 1987) syntactic category in Dutch (and more broadly in Germanic), and that languages vary regarding which word classes they allow in this position. OOSTERHOF / RAWOENS (2017) examined article omission in newspaper headlines of Dutch. Recent work on definite articles in the regional languages of Dutch include CORVER / VAN KOPPEN (2010) and CORVER / VAN OOSTENDORP (2005), which analyze the behavior of definite articles in the dialects of Dutch within the framework of syntactic microvariation, the latter of which looks exclusively at the occurrence of the definite article with nominal possessives in Dutch Low Saxon (Section 4.4.4). With regard to article use in generic expressions in Dutch dialects, OOSTERHOF / RYS (2004) present a study on

- 3 Other authors speak of "bare nouns" (e.g. DE SWART / ZWARTS 2009) or of "unarticulated definiteness" (e.g. GREENBERG 1973; 1991, MARTI 2012). The term "bare nouns" has considerable currency; however, it subsumes different phenomena and is not limited to definite nominal expressions. For this reason, we will avoid it.
- 4 See KOLDE (1996) for an extensive bibliographic overview of studies on definite articles in (varieties of) Dutch and German, *inter alia*, up to 1996.
- 5 For related Germanic languages, PIMENOVA (2017) recently analyzed the distribution of the protoarticle in Gothic in locative expressions.

regional preferences in the dialects of the Dutch language area (Section 4.2.1.2). With regard to the variable use of the definite article in Low Saxon dialects, APOTHEKER (1980) and OOSTERHOF (2008a) examined Dutch Low Saxon and PHEIFF (2017) examined both Dutch and German Low Saxon in this regard (Section 4.2).⁶ OOSTERHOF (2006, 2008b) and OOSTERHOF / RYS (2004) touch upon it tangentially, the former of which from a generative perspective. Surprisingly, the major dialect-syntactic projects (AND, SAND, DiDDD) in the Dutch-language area have not given the variable use of the definite article any attention (e.g. GERRITSEN 1990 on the AND, BARBIERS ET AL. 2005, 2006, 2008 on the SAND, CORVER ET AL. 2007 on DiDDD). AUER / CORNIPS (2020) analyzed the use of bare nouns in prepositional phrases in two miners' (Cité Duits and Ruhr German) and two ethnolect varieties (in Gouda and Stuttgart).

Of particular interest is a comparative study by SCHMUCK (2020), who investigated the grammaticalization of definite articles comparatively in Dutch, English, and German, with a focus on the use of the article in generic and onymic nominal expressions. We will return to a discussion of the relevant studies and their findings in Section 4.2.

1.4 DEFINITE ARTICLES IN THE AREAL TYPOLOGY OF EUROPE

HASPELMATH (2001: 1494) regards definite articles as a typical feature of Standard Average European (SAE), whose core area is West Central Europe (VAN DER AUWERA 2011: 295, 297). ASKEDAL (2000: 1140) similarly considers the definite article as a common feature of European languages, especially of the Germanic and Romance languages. For the investigation of SAE and the areal typology of European languages, the standard languages of Europe initially constituted the data basis due to a lack of available non-standard language data. However, even now, despite years of investigation into non-standard varieties spoken in Europe, they have played little role (KORTMANN 2004: 1–2, 2010: 856, also SEILER 2019: 423–424). The investigation into the status of the definite article in Low Saxon dialect varieties has implications for any typology of European languages based on non-standard language data. Before such a typology is possible, however, there are at least two issues that must be addressed since it is not a trivial matter ascribing a feature to a certain variety. First, it would be necessary to define the features in question (SEILER 2019: 428). For example, HASPELMATH (2001: 1494) writes with regard to the system of articles:

6 Within the context of Definite Article Reduction (DAR) in English dialects, there has also been considerable discussion about not only varying reduced forms of a definite article that competes with a full form *the*, but also about the absence of the definite article, a feature occurring in York and Lancashire English dialects. See e.g. RÁCZ (2012), RUPP (2007), RUPP / PAGE-VERHOEFF (2005), but especially HOLLMANN / SIEWIERSKA (2011), RUPP / TAGLIAMONTE (2019), TAGLIAMONTE / ROEDER (2009) on the absence of the definite article in English dialects.

Both a definite and an indefinite article [...] exist in all Romance and almost all Germanic languages plus some of the Balkan languages [...] but not outside Standard Average European. To be sure, their forms and syntactic behavior show considerable diversity [...], but their very existence is characteristic enough (HASPELMATH 2001: 1494)

However, as SEILER (2019: 428) argues, is it the mere existence of an article that should count when ascribing a feature to a particular variety? Alternatively, the criterion could be whether the article has a particular function in a given variety. For example, in Alemannic dialects, the definite article can be used together with person names. Thus, depending on the definition of the feature, Standard German and Alemannic would be equally characterized as SAE, or, in the event that the definitional criterion is functional in nature, it might be necessary to characterize Alemannic as more and Standard German as less SAE. Further, SEILER (2019: 427) argues that the obligatoriness of a feature in a particular variety is also at issue. Similarly, as we will observe in this study, the definite article is not always obligatory, depending on the context. While a classification of the dialects within an areal typology of European languages is not the goal of this study, the implications of this study for an areal typology of definite article systems in Europe deserves mention since the criterion of existence, function or obligatoriness might lead to different results.⁷ This matter, however, will not be further explored in this study and will be left to others to consider.

1.5 LOW SAXON DIALECTS

1.5.1 The Relation of the Base Dialects to the Standard Languages

In this section, we would first like to define what we mean under “dialect” and “standard language”. SCHMIDT (2010a: 149) defines *dialects* as “[...] the least

7 For example, HEINE / KUTEVA (2006: 97–139) investigate the development of definite articles in European languages. They assume HAWKIN’S (2004) typology of article stages (Section 3.2). This definitional criterion becomes especially important here because studies like HEINE / KUTEVA (2006) assume that determinatives that are used anaphorically are not demonstratives, but rather definite articles. This does not conform to the approach in HIMMELMANN (1997) for example, which views the anaphoric use as insufficient to regard a determinative as a definite article. The approach of viewing those elements as definite articles that are used anaphorically is also often found in historical studies such as PIMENOVA (2017) on Gothic. Other studies such as SOMMERER (2012) on the emergence of the definite article in Old English do not take semantic-pragmatic criteria into account, but the three factors co-occurrence, relative position, and obligatoriness. KRÁMSKÝ (1972) even claims that the generic use of the definite article is the primary criterion to decide whether an element is a definite article (see also ULTAN 1978: 251). This overview underlines the fact that studies to date have applied varying criteria to determine whether a particular variety of a language has articles, and that any areal typology of Europe that wants to take non-standard and historical varieties into account needs a set of uniform criteria. See Chapter 2 on the uses and functions of demonstratives and definite articles.

standard and most local (regionally restricted) full variety”.⁸ The standard language, on the other hand, is a full variety towards whose literal norm speakers orient themselves, and which is free of communicatively salient regionalisms (SCHMIDT / HERRGEN 2011: 62). The concept of a full variety is defined as follows:

Full varieties can be specified as sectors of linguistic knowledge defined by independent prosodic/phonological and morphosyntactic structures on the basis of which individuals or groups of speakers interact in particular situations. The full varieties of a language are semi-discrete and interdependent. The minimal and necessary criterion is the presence of at least one ‘idiovarietal’ element or structural feature in the prosodic/phonological or morphosyntactic subsystems. (SCHMIDT 2010a: 148–149).

Throughout Europe, dialect varieties and their respective standard language varieties are related to each other in different constellations. These constellations are also influenced by the structural distance between the dialects and the standard languages. In general, German Low Saxon dialects such as the dialects of East Frisia show a greater degree of structural distinctness to Standard German than Dutch Low Saxon dialects do to Standard Dutch.

To characterize the dynamics between the base dialects and standard language in the Netherlands, GRONDELAERS / VAN HOUT (2011: 204–207) make use of AUER’S (2005, 2011) classification of standard-dialect configurations. The Netherlands constituted a “Type B Repertoire of Spoken Diglossia” around 1960, involving a written and spoken standard variety that endoglossically developed from the dialects:

The structural difference between standard and dialect is perceived as too large to be bridged by intermediate forms. The two varieties are kept apart in speaking, usually because they are subject to different usage norms. Code-switching between standard and dialect is possible but gradual transitions (code-gliding) is not (AUER 2011: 494).

According to AUER (2005: 27), generally speaking, the Netherlands now primarily constitute a “Type C Repertoire of Spoken Diaglossia” (however, see GRONDELAERS / VAN HOUT 2011: 216 for a somewhat different assessment). Thus, the former diglossic situation has given way to a diaglossic situation.⁹ In fact, the Netherlands underwent a shift from the dialect being the dominant means of communication to a situation in which the standard language dominates between the two world wars (WILLEMYNS 1997: 150).¹⁰

- 8 In the Anglo-American tradition, dialects have been defined as “varieties which are grammatically (and perhaps lexically) as well as phonologically different from other varieties” whereby a *variety* is “a neutral term to apply to any particular kind of language, which we wish, for some purpose, to consider as a single entity” (CHAMBERS / TRUDGILL 2004: 5). We prefer the definition after SCHMIDT (2010a, see also SCHMIDT / HERRGEN 2011) since it emphasizes that its communicative scope is regionally restricted and because they more strictly define the term variety.
- 9 See FERGUSON (1959) and BELLMANN (1998: 24) on the terms diglossia and diaglossia, respectively.
- 10 WILLEMYNS (1997: 145–149) identifies social, geographic, temporal, and functional factors that are responsible for the replacement of the base dialects by the standard language and regiolects. WILLEMYNS lends particular importance to the fact of time since dialect competence

With regard to German, up until the 20th century, we can assume a situation of medial diglossia in which most speakers could speak dialect and some speakers were able to write the written standard language. Beginning around 1800, more and more speakers began to acquire a competence in the written standard language because of the introduction of a mandatory school education (KEHREIN 2019, SCHMIDT 2017). In general, the status of the dialects in the Low German dialect area are undergoing a shift to dialect loss (AUER 2005: 29). Specifically in East Frisia, the transition from Low German to High German occurred at a later point and under different circumstances than in the rest of the Low German-speaking area (REERSHEMIUS 1996: 106).

We can glean from this discussion that the dialect was the dominant variety for speakers as early as before the Second World War in both Germany and the Netherlands. Further, the base dialects on both sides of the state border are related vertically to an overarching standard language, either Standard Dutch or Standard German. However, the linguistic situation differs regarding the degree to which the dialects are structurally different from the standard languages. These observations are important because the speakers whose language use we will investigate in this study were socialized at a point when the dialect was the primary vehicle of communication in everyday life, meaning that we can assume that the speakers have a high degree of competence in the local dialect.

1.5.2 North(ern) Low Saxon Dialects across Borders

The Dutch-German border is a paragon example for the fact that administrative or political borders between states and nations do not have to be dialect borders (NIEBAUM 1997a: 49). Historically, the Dutch-German state border has been relatively unimportant as a dialect border, although this has been steadily changing in the perception of dialect speakers (NIEBAUM 1990; 1992: 265; see also HOHENSTEIN 2016; 2017 on the border between Drenthe and Emsland). In this context, the Ems-Dollart region is particularly important:

In dieser Region schält sich Ostfriesland-Groningerland als eine von fünf deutlich differenzierten Wortlandschaften heraus [...], ein Befund, der sich auch durch Linien phonologischer, morphologischer und syntaktischer Merkmale sowie sprachstrukturelle Grenzen stützen läßt. ‘In this region, East Frisia and Groningen emerge as one of five distinctly different lexical landscapes [...], a finding that is supported by lines of phonological, morphological and syntactic features as well as structural borders’ (NIEBAUM 1997a: 67, our translation).

Thus, historically speaking, the state border did not function as a dialect border with regard to dialect features. For example, NIEBAUM (1992: 261) points out that the state border was relatively meaningless as a lexical border. WIESINGER (1983: 878)

has been decreasing from generation to generation and, at the same time, dialect occupies fewer and fewer functional domains in speakers’ everyday lives, even in the Low Saxon dialect area where dialect competence and use are comparatively high.

also points out that what he refers to as North Low German dialects, here referred to as North Low Saxon dialects, extend across the Dutch-German state border. KEMPEN (1981: 360) writes that contemporary dialects of East Frisian are closely aligned with the contiguous dialects of Groningen in the southwest. This is supported by the fact that speakers from this region mutually understand each other, despite which side of the state border they might hail from. For example, HEEROMA (1957: 179) claims that speakers from Groningen and East Frisia understand each other without difficulty and that the same also applies to speakers from Twente and Bentheim as well as Achterhoek and West Münsterland.¹¹ Whether speakers (still) perceive these “objective” similarities between the dialects is another matter, of course. For the Dutch-German border region, recent studies show that if speakers are asked to indicate where dialects similar to the speakers’ own dialects are spoken, with few exceptions, they generally only mention neighboring towns in their own respective countries (AUER 2004: 168). Naturally, this perception of the language area has an influence on speakers’ use of the dialect varieties in their cross-border relations.

While, diachronically speaking, Low Saxon emerged from the protosystem Old Low Saxon, synchronically speaking, Low Saxon forms a part of the *diasystems* of German and Dutch since it is under the umbrella of Standard Dutch on the western side of the border and Standard German on the eastern side of the border (SCHRÖDER 2004: 35–36). This aspect is important for the further development of Low Saxon on both sides of the border. SCHRÖDER (2004: 36) argues that speakers’ use of the dialect for cross-border communication has sharply decreased over the years, and, as a result, there is a detectable interruption in the dialect continuum. This has led to an ever-decreasing importance of dialects for cross-border communication, consequently leading to less mutual influence as a result of the fact

daß die Dialekte [...] beiderseits der dt.-nl. Grenze heute in keinem nennenswerten Kontakt miteinander stehen und daß daher keine gegenseitigen Beeinflussungen mehr zu erwarten sind, sondern daß im Gegenteil die Kommunikation über die Grenze hinweg [...] für sich genommen heute im Wesentlichen unter dem Zeichen der dt. bzw. nl. Standardsprache steht. ‘that the dialects [...] on both sides of the German-Dutch border do not have any noteworthy contact with each other and that, for this reason, we cannot expect any mutual influence, but instead that cross-border communication now primarily happens in Standard German or Dutch’ (KREMER 1979: 158, our translation).

There has been decreased dialect contact across the borders, which leads to a decrease in horizontal convergence processes. The influence of the standard languages on both sides of the border have led to vertical convergence processes in the base dialects toward the respective standard languages in all linguistic subsystems (see for example, ELEMENTALER 2008; 2009; 2019, HOHENSTEIN 2016; 2017, NIEBAUM 1990; 2000, REKER 1983, also SMITS 2011 and SMITS / KLOOTS 2010 for the Achterhoek/Westphalian part of the border). The secondary result of these convergence processes toward the respective standard languages is of course the divergence of the dialects situated near the border away from one another:

11 See also BREMER (1902: 1) for similar assessments.

Seit dem 19. Jahrhundert ist dann allerdings weniger mit der horizontalen Ausbreitung westlicher mundartlicher Formen nach Osten zu rechnen als vielmehr mit der vertikalen Infiltration hoch- bzw. st[andard]sp[rachlicher] Elemente aufgrund sich verändernder Kommunikationsmuster. ‘Since the 19th century, we can expect less horizontal diffusion of western dialect forms toward the east and more vertical infiltration of standard-language elements because of changing communication patterns’ (NIEBAUM 1992: 259, our translation).

The changes in speakers’ communicative behavior on both sides of the border since World War II, discussed in Section 1.5, thus have consequences for changes in the dialects on both sides of the border, which manifest themselves in different ways. For example, recent studies in the 21st century have shown that the degree of structural loss of the characteristic properties of the dialects is lower for the Low Saxon base dialects of Germany for the simple reason that there is a greater systematic contrast between Low Saxon and Standard German than there is between Low Saxon and Standard Dutch (HOHENSTEIN 2016: 118, also e.g. NIEBAUM 1992: 264–265, also SMITS 2011 and SMITS / KLOOTS 2010 for similar results in the Achterhoek/Westphalian border dialects). Despite this, speakers in the eastern Netherlands nonetheless have a greater loyalty to the local dialect in the eastern Netherlands than in the bordering German areas (NIEBAUM 1992: 265; 1997a: 68).

1.5.3 Area of Investigation

In light of the preceding discussion, we would like to formally outline our area of investigation at this point. While this investigation will focus on varieties of Low Saxon on both sides of the Dutch-German state border, it will only examine those Dutch Low Saxon varieties spoken in the Dutch provinces of Groningen and Drenthe and the German Low Saxon varieties belonging to North Low German. Specifically, it will focus on the dialects of East Frisia, a peninsula in the northwest of Germany bordering on the North Sea in the North and on the province of Groningen in the Netherlands to the West.¹² It consists of the districts of Aurich, Leer, and Wittmund as well as the urban district Emden. The reason for its inclusion in this study is that it is an area in which we can most reasonably expect similarities to the bordering Dutch Low Saxon dialects because of historical contact (e.g. NIEBAUM 1990, see the discussion in Section 1.5.2). The primary focus of the study will be on the variable use of the definite article in the Dutch Low Saxon base dialects, with the East Frisian Low German dialects allowing for a point of comparison. Map 1 shows the area of investigation for this study.

12 East Frisian Low German has a comparatively high number of dialect-competent speakers (e.g. REERSHEMIUS 2004, SCHMIDT 2017), and, speakers use the base dialect in everyday communication (REERSHEMIUS 2004). Still, the number of younger speakers has declined in the last thirty years (REERSHEMIUS 2004: 14, §4.2). Of the Low Saxon dialects in the Netherlands, BLOEMHOFF (2008: 301) shows that speakers from Groningen and Drenthe are able to speak a variety of Low Saxon (ca. 77% and 76%, respectively), and have the highest rates of competence, even if speakers use the variety less often at home compared to other areas in the Low Saxon dialect area.



Map 1: The area of investigation

Map 1 shows the northwest of Germany and the northeast of the Netherlands. The boldface dark line represents the state border between the two countries. In the Netherlands, we can recognize, following REKER (1993, 2008) the three dialect groups North Groningen, East Groningen, and West Groningen, which, taken together, correspond to the province of Groningen.¹³ REKER (1993: 12–13) explains the division. From the city of Groningen, one isogloss runs to the northwest along the Reitdiep, a stream leading to the Lauwersmeer. The area to the southwest of this isogloss is West Groningen, comprising the historical region of the Westerkwartier. The second isogloss runs to the northeast from the city of Groningen along the Damsterdiep, a canal leading to the Ems. The area to the south of this line is East Groningen. This area comprises the historical regions of Oldambt, the Veenkoloniën, the Westerwolde, and parts of Fivelingo. It also consists of the city of Groningen. North Groningen is situated to the north of these two isoglosses, comprising the regions of Hunsingo, parts of Fivelingo, and the Hogeland. Furthermore, we can recognize the province of Drenthe, which will not be partitioned into smaller dialect groups, since we do not expect any additional

13 Interested readers may ponder as to why we specifically chose REKER'S (2008) classification, and not, say, REKER'S (1983) classification, or the well-known DAAN / BLOK (1969) dialect classification. The reason for this choice is largely practical in nature. REKER'S (1983) classification contains seven dialect groupings within the province of Groningen alone, which would have been too fine grained. DAAN / BLOK'S (1969) classification only differentiates two dialects within Groningen, which may have been too coarse for the analysis.

insights for our analysis. In Chapter 6, Drenthe will be treated as one “dialect grouping”. Of course, it should go without saying that dialect borders are not the same as administrative borders; its inclusion as one “dialect grouping” is simply terminologically convenient. Since WIESINGER’S (1983) dialect classification map does not contain an area of East Frisian dialects¹⁴, we will additionally make use of LAMELI’S (2016) classification of North German dialects, which includes an area roughly corresponding to that associated with East Frisian dialects. For the sake of clarity, we undertook this partition of the area of investigation for three reasons. First, it is in this area where we expect the definite articles to show variable behavior. Second, the classification of Groningen with three dialect divisions has been chosen because the frequency of the absence of the definite article is expected to be highest, while in East Frisia and Drenthe it is expected to be low, making a partition into additional dialect groupings unnecessary. Third and finally, while in Germany East Frisia could be described dialect-geographically within the continuum of Low Saxon dialects, the dialects in Groningen and Drenthe have been previously grouped based on the province. This partition allows for an *ad-hoc* categorization of the variants to describe their spatial distribution and behavior.

1.6 THE STRUCTURE OF THIS DISSERTATION

This thesis takes an interdisciplinary approach to the variable absence and presence of the definite article in Low Saxon. By combining methods and approaches from historical linguistics, language typology, sociolinguistics, dialectology, grammaticalization research, it attempts to explain how the definite article has developed in these dialects. Our main thesis is that the variable presence and absence of the definite article is a historical relict, in particular, the absence of the definite article is an older feature, while the presence of the definite article is a younger feature. It is the result of a grammaticalization process, whose stages are deducible from the spatial distribution of the variants in varying contexts. Since we understand grammaticalization to involve context expansion, we will show that the definite article is more expansive from south to north, and that this spatial distribution reflects a historical sequence. For this reason, this study has the following structure. In Chapter 2, we will first review the uses of definite articles and demonstratives before showing how to differentiate these two elements. Then, in Chapter 3, since we are taking a grammaticalization perspective, we will review different, relevant approaches to grammaticalization to add to our analytical toolkit. Then, we will review well-known typological paths that demonstratives take when they grammaticalize into elements such as definite articles. Finally, we will take a historical perspective and examine the emergence and development of definite

14 WIESINGER (1983: 880) states that the *North Low German*, or North Low Saxon, dialect area in Germany can be divided into seven bigger dialect groups including Emslandic and East Frisian, the latter of which he appears to associate with the coastal region of East Frisia without reference to specific features.

articles from demonstratives in two older West Germanic varieties: Old High German and Old Dutch. These observable historical trends strengthen the plausibility that the variable presence and absence of the definite article in the varieties investigated here is an instance of a “stalled” grammaticalization process. In Chapter 4, we will review the research history on the absence of the definite article in Low Saxon varieties. Dialect grammars and dictionaries provide ample evidence for the absence of the definite article in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, however. This evidence makes the claim plausible that the variable occurrence of the definite article is less a recent phenomenon than an older one. Then a series of studies are discussed. Despite researchers’ awareness of this variable phenomenon since at least 1874, there has been little scholarly work on this topic. The extant literature has examined which factors might motivate the absence of the definite article and have examined its spatial distribution. We then sketch out the main lines of argumentation of previous, mostly generative, accounts. We then discuss their shortcomings before formulating our own hypotheses. In Chapter 5, we outline the reasons for our choice of data, present some of the basic ideas concerning our methods, and then introduce the materials that we used. Chapter 6 contains the results of our empirical analyses sorted by factor group and data source. Finally, Chapter 7 contextualizes and interprets the results in light of our expectations that grammaticalization theory provides us. It attributes the investigated dialects to particular stages in a grammaticalization chain, offers some insight into why certain contextual factors should be responsible for the development of the definite article, and then attempts to explain why the definite article should grammaticalize at a slower rate, or why its grammaticalization stalled, in the dialects at hand. After highlighting some unresolved issues, it finally closes with some suggestions for future avenues of research.