

# Strange bedfellows: Non-metonymic English proper names and the indefinite article

Leszek Berezowski  
University of Wrocław

## Abstract

The paper explores the use of the indefinite article with English proper names that are non-metonymic, e.g. *an angry Clinton*, *an independent Poland*, etc. In contrast to indefinite proper name uses that metonymically stand for works of art or qualities of famous individuals, e.g. *a van Gogh* or *a Napoleon*, non-metonymic uses of proper names with the indefinite article have been researched rarely, in quite divergent terms and on the basis of few examples. In order to verify the claims of existing accounts and improve on them the paper draws on corpus data from COCA and COHA and shows that personal proper names tend to be used with the indefinite article in the presence of modifiers designating temporary conditions and geographical proper names tend to take the indefinite article when the context leaves no doubt that they refer to stages in the history of their referents. In the latter case it is additionally shown that indefinite article usages cluster in the years of struggle to achieve the attributes designated by the modifiers, e.g. independence, but fade off once the struggle is over. Based on such findings the paper claims that English non-metonymic proper names take the indefinite article under the same general conditions as any other English nominals and disproves the contention that in such usages the difference between the definite and indefinite articles is neutralized.

**Keywords:** English, proper name, indefinite article, adjective

## 1 Introduction

For a linguist the question whether proper names can cooccur with the indefinite article is a contentious one, as they are commonly taken to be definite (cf. Van Langendonck & Van de Velde (2016: 19) and the references cited therein). There are precious few publications probing indefinite proper name uses in any detail, but linguists have managed to take three quite different positions on the resolution of the issue.

One approach, typical of English descriptive grammars (e.g. Quirk et al. 1972; Huddleston 1984; Biber et al. 1999; Aarts 2011), and a few studies in English article usage, e.g. Seppänen (1982) and Chesterman (1991), is to acknowledge that proper names can take the indefinite article only in evidently metonymic uses and deny or disregard the existence of any other cases. In other words, such publications dutifully note the existence of patterns wherein a proper name preceded by the indefinite article actually stands for a work of art authored by the bearer of the name, as in (1), or the qualities epitomized by a well-known individual, as in (2), but do not go beyond commenting on a selection of such specimens variously termed *secondary uses of proper names*, *proper names behaving as common nouns*, *appellativized proper names*, *appellative uses of proper names*, etc.

- (1) The Hermitage has 3 million works of art. Our guide said that if you spent a minute in front of every piece, it would take many years to look at everything. It almost seemed as if she tried to do that in a couple of hours as she zipped from ornate room to ornate room, pointing out **a Monet** here, **a Rodin** there, **a van Gogh** in that corner, **a Raffaello** just to your right and **a Matisse** across the way. [COCA]
- (2) The importance of peace is evident in all three classics mentioned above. For instance, Haas and Deutsch point out that one is only studying voluntary integration and not the integration of Europe under **a Napoleon** or **a Hitler**. [COCA]

Another approach, typical for studies focusing on English article use and proper name typology (e.g. Hewson 1972: 89; Berezowski 2001: 212–215; Van Langendonck 2007: 176; Van Langendonck & Van de Velde 2016), is to report that besides the metonymic uses exemplified in (1–2) above there are also well-documented cases of proper names taking the indefinite article that are manifestly not metonymic, e.g.:

- (3) **An angry Clinton** interrupted moderator Jim Lehrer, who was trying to move to the next question, to say he had to “defend the honor of my state. The difference between Arkansas and the United States is that we’re going in the right direction and this country’s going in the wrong direction,” he said. [COCA]
- (4) Perhaps the most worrisome casualty of the new American diplomacy is the U.S.-European partnership that was the driving force for a

liberal global order from 1945 until 9/11. Throughout that entire period, the United States encouraged development of **a more united Europe** that would share the burdens of world leadership. President John F. Kennedy set the tone at Independence Hall on July 4, 1962, when he said, “We don’t regard **a strong, united Europe** as a rival, but as a partner.” [COCA]

As noted in Van Langendonck (2007: 176), proper names featuring in such examples are modified (cf. the use of the adjectives *angry*, *strong* and *united*) but they refer to unique entities, e.g. the forty-second US president in (3) and the continent stretching from Portugal to the Urals in (4), and should thus be treated on a par with any other proper names. In onomastic literature such usages are typically labeled *proprial*, but in studies focused on English article use this term is seldom found, so a more descriptive label will be relied on below. Since the usages illustrated in (3–4) do not involve metonymies, they will be simply referred to in this paper as *non-metonymic*.

A third approach, based on an analysis developed in Paul (1994), tries to strike some kind of compromise between the two positions outlined above in that it does acknowledge the existence of non-metonymic examples of proper names taking the indefinite article, as illustrated in (3–4), but classifies them as secondary uses, i.e. lumps them together with the clearly metonymic usages exemplified in (1–2) above. The rationale behind such a treatment is the claim that the presence of an article and a modifier makes a proper name refer only to a manifestation of its bearer (Payne & Huddleston 2002: 521), somewhat more vividly defined in Matushansky (2015: 4) as a spatial-temporal slice or an aspect of the entity bearing the proper name, e.g. the period in which Clinton showed anger in (3), the time when Europe is strong and united in (4), etc. Besides these two publications such an approach is espoused also in Matushansky (2006; 2008) and in von Heusinger & Wespel (2007), where it is argued for at some length.

This paper will in principle subscribe to the third of the positions outlined above, but it will question the erasure of the difference between the use of the definite and the indefinite article presumed in that line of thinking (e.g. Payne & Huddleston 2002: 521; Matushansky 2006: 291; 2015: 4; von Heusinger & Wespel 2007: 340). Specifically, in contrast to the analyses assuming that the choice of the article in non-metonymic modified proper name usages is largely irrelevant, the paper will show that the indefinite article tends to be used in such cases under highly specific conditions that follow from its

basic properties and, consequently, clearly differ from the conditions inviting the use of the definite article. In other words, the goal of the paper is to demonstrate that the key properties of the English indefinite article described in studies researching its more typical uses apply also to non-metonymic modified proper name usages illustrated in (3–4) above.

The paper is organized as follows. § 2 describes the sources of examples used in the analysis and their retrieval, § 3 reviews previous discussions of non-metonymic proper name uses with the indefinite article, § 4 investigates the roots of the incompatibility of the indefinite article and proper names, § 5 develops a unified account of such usages by drawing on examples of modified personal proper names illustrated in (3) above, § 6 extends that account to modified geographical proper names exemplified in (4), and § 7 draws final conclusions.

## 2 Data

The paper is based on data retrieved from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) save for § 6, where the argument partly rests on historical evidence sourced from the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA). The only exception is the gargantuan final example drawn from a guidebook. The two principal reasons for the choice of COCA were its size and structure. COCA is balanced by genre and at the time of writing comprised more than one billion words, which gave a fair chance that even low frequency usages would be represented. Another reason was that one of its sister corpora is COHA, which at the time of writing reached roughly half of COCA's size and covered the time period from the 1820s to the 2010s. The two corpora differ in genre composition and are not fully compatible, but the difference is immaterial for the study at hand, as it does not rely on comparing diachronic frequency data. In fact, the only historical information it depends on is identifying the years from which particular examples in § 6 actually come.

Both corpora were searched online in a four-stage procedure. The first step was to query each corpus for tokens of proper names preceded by an adjective. One reason for starting off with such a general query was that any more direct search for tokens of article use with non-metonymic proper names modified by adjectives, e.g. by using search strings like “ART ADJ NAME”, “an ADJ NAME”, etc., produced results that missed many personal proper name

usages, e.g. *a beaming Clinton, an angry Obama*, etc., that could be easily retrieved by performing more specific searches, e.g. “ART ADJ Clinton”, “ART ADJ Bush”, etc. Another reason was that any query including the definite or indefinite article was bound to produce results excluding all cases where no article was used, e.g. *young Kennedy, newly independent Namibia* etc., which would also skew the results. Consequently, it was imperative to cast the net wider and then gradually narrow down the results.

As might be expected, the use of the search string “ADJNAME” to retrieve tokens of proper names preceded by adjectives produced results that were plentiful, quite varied and mostly irrelevant for the purpose at hand. The hits ranged from *the late John McCain* to *Muddy Waters, Big Mac* and *Lower Manhattan*, to quote only a few examples, but their article usage was intact and some of them were bona fide instances of modified non-metonymic proper names. Sifting through the results was laborious, but given enough time and patience to examine them in detail, it was possible to identify three sets of adjectives: those that most frequently collocated with personal proper names and the indefinite article, those that most frequently cooccurred with personal proper names and the definite article / no article, and those that most frequently collocated with geographical proper names and the indefinite article. Since the task of isolating these adjectives was time-consuming, it was decided that the procedure would be limited to identifying 5 adjectives in the first two sets based on COCA and three in the third one based on COHA. The first set comprises *angry, beaming, relaxed, smiling, and tired*, the second one *great, famous, late, old* and *young*, and the third one *divided, independent* and *united*.

As has been noted above, in the case of both corpora more specific searches for proper names modified by adjectives produced more reliable results than general queries. In order to make sure that no tokens would be missed, in stage three both corpora were thus searched for proper names modified by each of the adjectives qualified to a particular set. In other words, COCA was queried for tokens of proper names preceded by *angry, famous*, etc., COHA was searched for instances of proper names modified by *independent, divided*, etc., and the results were checked one by one to weed out any items that were not genuine examples of non-metonymic proper names preceded by a modifier. The examples that were eliminated included, for instance, all specimens in which a modified proper name was itself a modifier of another noun, e.g. *an old Kennedy admirer*, any cases where items marked as adjectives in the search returns on closer inspection turned out to be verbs, e.g. *The massage had relaxed Anthony*, etc.

The final step of the procedure was counting how many genuine examples of modified non-metonymic proper names were preceded by the indefinite article, the definite article, or no article at all. It made it possible to capture the full picture of article use and arrive at reliable figures. Another side effect of tallying article usages in the final step of the procedure was that examples of multiple modifier use, e.g. *a much better composed and relaxed Nixon*, did not have to be searched for separately but were included in the data retrieved in step three.

### 3 Previous scholarship

Recent studies of non-metonymic proper name uses taking the indefinite article, as exemplified in (3–4) above, are scant but, incidentally, the two most important ones date from the same year. The most detailed account so far is Van Langendonck (2007: 176–179) and it will be reviewed first.

Van Langendonck's explanation is cast in terms of indefinite article functions. Specifically, he claims that in nominals like *an angry Clinton* the indefinite article serves in three distinct functions which he dubbed (i) *countability*, (ii) *expressivity* and (iii) *temporary state of the name bearer* (Van Langendonck 2007: 178). The concept of the countability function is rooted in a broader view of the indefinite article in which it is defined by the range of functions it fulfills. The two primary ones in English are introducing new referents into discourse and indicating that a nominal is countable. The first of these functions is evidently inactive in nominals like *an angry Clinton*, as they do not serve to introduce new referents (Van Langendonck 2007: 177), but there is no evidence for the deactivation of the second one, since proper names are inherently countable, so it is presumed to apply.

In Van Langendonck (2007) and likewise in Van Langendonck & Van de Velde (2016), that is taken to mean that in any such cases the proper name remains definite, since the indefinite article is claimed to operate as a countability marker only, which presumes that the functions of the indefinite article are independent of one another as if they were separate entities. The remaining two functions posited in Van Langendonck (2007) are more straightforward. Expressivity serves to intimate a contrast between the condition of the referent actually referred to, e.g. Clinton venting some anger in (3), and his other emotional states, and the third one is self-explanatory in indicating that the condition of the referent, e.g. Clinton's anger in (3), is temporary.

Such an approach focuses on capturing fine shades of meaning expressed by proper names when they take modifiers along with the indefinite article and remain non-metonymic, but it does so in a way which is difficult to verify. For one thing, it attributes all these shades of meaning to the use of the article itself and neglects any other contributions to the meaning of the nominal. The intimation of a comparison in *an angry Clinton* may well be due to the fact that the proper name is modified by an adjective and the temporary nature of the condition referred to may be inferred from the meaning of that adjective, but the explanation based on article functions does not explore any such options.

Secondly, the stipulation of particular indefinite article functions is not paralleled by identifying factors instrumental in activating them, which makes it impossible to verify in any objective way if such functions are truly operative in English and if so, to what extent they carry the meanings they are accorded. And thirdly, this explanation takes indefinite article usages as the point of departure and seeks to capture their meanings by invoking a number of indefinite article functions, but it does not address the more basic question why the indefinite article is selected in nominals like *an angry Clinton* instead of the definite one and when it is grammatical to do so. This approach is thus rich in intuitions that will be explored in the following sections, but it is short on testable predictions that could be verified against a body of corpus examples and is framed in terminology that is not much used in most modern indefinite article studies.

An alternative explanation is offered in von Heusinger & Wespel (2007). It is far more technical in that it seeks to capture the meanings carried by proper names taking modifiers and an article in the formulas of formal semantics, but the key concept it relies on is the notion of *name bearer manifestation*, i. e. a time interval in which a particular feature of the name bearer is manifest (von Heusinger & Wespel 2007: 338–339), later fine-tuned in Matushansky (2015: 4) to stand for a spatial-temporal slice or an aspect of the entity bearing the proper name. Specifically, von Heusinger & Wespel (2007: 337–340) claim that preceding a proper name with the definite or indefinite article introduces a variable over such manifestations, and if the variable is filled by an adjective, it triggers a contrast with other manifestations of the same individual; e. g. the use of an adjective in *an angry Clinton* invites comparisons with other manifestations / spatial-temporal slices of the same referent.

Von Heusinger & Wespel (2007) formalized the concept of name bearer manifestations introduced somewhat informally in Payne & Huddleston (2002: 521) and prefigured in Kleiber (1981), but their account is based

on the assumption that the definite article and the indefinite article are interchangeable in triggering such manifestations. Just like Payne & Huddleston (2002), von Heusinger & Wespel (2007) neither make any attempt to discern any differences between preceding a modified proper name with the definite or the indefinite article, nor show that in the contexts they consider any such differences have been neutralized. They simply proceed on the assumption that in modified proper names there is no difference between choosing the definite or the indefinite article, which is quite surprising given the stark differences between the meanings of the English articles evident in scores of other contexts. Ultimately, the account put forward in von Heusinger & Wespel (2007) suffers thus from the same flaw as the much more traditional explanation in Van Langendonck (2007) in that striving to capture the meanings carried by proper names that are modified and take an article it does not address the question why a particular article is used with a modified proper name and when it is grammatical to do so.

The same assumption is taken for granted by Matushansky (2006; 2008; 2015), but the account to be developed below will show that it is fallacious, as the factors triggering the use of the indefinite article with non-metonymic proper names are the same as elsewhere in English and, consequently, substantially different from the conditions calling for the use of the definite article in such a context.

#### 4 The incompatibility of the indefinite article and proper names

As noted in numerous studies listed in Van Langendonck & Van de Velde (2016: 19), proper names are inherently definite, which puts them in a fairly obvious contrast with the indefinite article. In order to account for usages in which such mismatched grammatical devices co-occur, it is thus imperative to explore the roots of their incompatibility first.

Proper names are quite peculiar nominals in that their reference does not depend on the context but is guaranteed to remain the same in any circumstances, e.g.:

- (5) Excuse me. We have a V.I.P. Function here. I need to ask you guys to leave, please. The gentleman behind **the bush**, you have to leave, please. [COCA]

- (6) Tonight's victory is evidence that the party establishment, the party base is somewhat solidly behind **Bush** despite his loss in New Hampshire. [COCA]

The excerpt in (5) comes from a movie script, so the referent of *the bush* is most likely plainly visible to all viewers on the screen and can be uniquely identified with little effort, but in other circumstances the same nominal may refer to a different plant any time it is spoken or written, depending on who uses it, where and when, while the referent of the proper name *Bush* in (6) remains rigidly the same across any context. In contrast to other definite nominals, the reference of proper names is thus inflexible, which made Kripke (1980) and scores of his followers term them *rigid designators*.

Historically, the constancy of proper name reference has been accounted for in terms of two principal models ultimately based on the ideas first fielded by John Stuart Mill and Bertrand Russell, respectively (Berezowski 2001). Both approaches have been the seedbeds for several further proposals (for a concise review, cf. Van Langendonck 2007), but they all draw on two principal insights. The former theories, commonly termed *Millian*, claim that proper names are different from any other vocabulary in that they are directly attached to the entities they denote and do not depend on disclosing their attributes (Mill 1843: 20). In other words, proper names do not have to indicate any features of their referents, which has been later captured in the generalization that proper names do not mean; e. g. any individuals whose last name is *Bush* need not have bushy eyebrows and/or hair, Greenland does not have to be green, etc. The latter theories, dubbed *Russellian*, claim that proper names are different from any other vocabulary because in fact they are bundles of definite descriptions, i. e. statements adding up to unique definitions of their referents (Russell 1971: 174). In that view definite descriptions form thus an intermediate step between a referent and its name, which ensures that the latter is unique and context-independent; e. g. the name *George W. Bush* may be paired with the descriptions “the forty-third US president”, “the son of the forty-first US president, who also became US president”, etc. For a review of such proposals from a linguistic standpoint cf. Coates (2006).

The practical significance of the stability of proper name reference is best appreciated by noting the variety of linguistic devices that are deployed to uphold it whenever it is jeopardized by the fact that clearly different referents use identical names. For example, if there are a number of people with the same last name in a given situation, the clarity of reference is easily restored

by resorting to first names, mid names, nicknames, initials, selected adjectives or their combinations; e.g. to distinguish between two former US presidents called *George Bush*, the younger one can be referred to as *George W. Bush* or *GWB*, and the older one as *George Herbert Bush* or *George Bush senior*. Popes and monarchs with the same first names are kept distinct by numbering them, e.g. *Elizabeth II* vs. *Elizabeth I*, and the same effect can be achieved by following identical first names with brief referent descriptions, e.g. *John the Baptist*, *John the Evangelist*, etc.

The use of such expedients throws into even starker relief the classic observation that referents are uniquely attached to proper names, which makes the latter incompatible with the basic specifications of the indefinite article illustrated below:

- (7) When Henry Kissinger talks about world order, to some it might seem as if he is living in a **previous century**. The 17th, perhaps. [COCA]

The use of the indefinite article in (7) leaves no doubt that the nominal *a previous century* refers to a single countable entity, but that is the only point of similarity between nominals preceded by the indefinite article and proper names. The most crucial difference is that the referent of an indefinite nominal is type identifiable only (Gundel et al. 1993: 275–276), which means that the use of the indefinite article instructs the readers that there is enough information provided in the context to work out what kind of referent is intended but not which one it is. In (7) the readers are thus cued that the referent of the indefinite nominal is one of the centuries preceding the time in which the text was written but it does not matter which specific century is referred to because the author did not intend this level of precision to be necessary for correct text comprehension, as is clearly demonstrated by the brief second sentence in the same example.

The facet of the indefinite article that has been studied the most is its role in anaphoric relationships and their contribution to discourse structure (for a synopsis of approaches and specific proposals, cf. von Heusinger 2006). However, as has been shown in Van Langendonck (2007: 153) and reiterated in Van Langendonck & Van de Velde (2016: 18), proper names do not participate in such relationships, which means that in order to explore indefinite article uses with non-metonymic proper names, its broader descriptions need to be invoked. One such model, originally broached in Hawkins (1978) and then refined in Hawkins (1991), claims that the key property of the indefinite article

is exclusive reference, i.e. marking that a nominal refers to a single item freely selected by the speaker/writer from a set containing at least two of them (Hawkins 1991: 426), and that approach is general enough to be applicable to the proper name usages to be discussed in the following sections.

In that perspective the use of an indefinite article is for the hearer/reader good and bad news at the same time. On the one hand the news is bad since once the speaker/writer has freely chosen a referent from a set of at least two without explaining to anybody which one he/she selected, the hearer/reader has no chance to work out which one it is; e.g. he/she cannot recall it from memory because it has not been introduced before, infer its identity from the context, as there are not enough clues to do so, etc. On the other hand, though, the news is good because once the hearer/reader realizes that this is the case, e.g. by spotting the indefinite article preceding a nominal, he or she can safely give up on searching for the referent and move on in the text without wasting time and effort. In other words, the indefinite article does not make nominals indefinite, countable, etc. as is presumed by studies that focus on describing its functions (e.g. Van Langendonck 2007), but merely marks the indefinite and countable status of a nominal, making the lives of hearers and readers easier by providing them with an explicit clue on the construal of the nominals they come across.

The main points of incompatibility between the indefinite article and proper names are thus quite clear. As has been shown above, proper names always have single, predetermined and context-independent referents, while the indefinite article instructs the hearer/reader that a single referent has been chosen by the speaker/writer from a set comprising at least two items. There is then no match between proper names and the indefinite article in two areas: context dependence and the number of potential referents.

## 5 The indefinite article and personal proper names

In order to explain why the indefinite article is taken by a range of non-metonymic personal proper names, it is best to start by inspecting the adjectives that modify them and their context of use, e.g.:

- (8) “We have now run out of time,” **a visibly angry Obama** said during an impromptu White House news conference held after Boehner (R-Ohio) called to say he was walking out on the talks for the second time in two weeks – again citing differences over taxes. [COCA]

**Table 1.** Adjectives most frequently cooccurring with personal proper names and the indefinite article in COCA

Total hits	<i>a/an</i>		Article use				Personal proper name modifier
			<i>the</i>		no article		
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
129	120	93.0	7	5.4	2	1.6	<i>angry</i>
110	81	73.6	11	10.0	18	16.4	<i>smiling</i>
53	49	92.5	1	1.9	3	5.6	<i>beaming</i>
24	19	79.2	1	4.2	4	16.6	<i>relaxed</i>
22	17	77.3	1	4.5	4	18.2	<i>tired</i>

- (9) “And don’t think Payton will wear out from his workload. Payton is averaging 46.2 minutes a game against the Rockets and 45.7 in 10 playoff games, both numbers far above his regular-season average of 39.2 minutes. **A tired Gary Payton** is better than a lot of point guards in this league,” said Houston’s Eddie Johnson, who teamed with Payton for 2 1/2 years in Seattle during the early ’90s. [COCA]

Both anger in (8) and fatigue in (9) are clearly temporary conditions. In most people anger usually passes quickly, especially if it is visible to others, and professional basketball players typically recuperate soon even after a long and tiring playoff season. The modifiers found in non-metonymic personal proper names preceded by the indefinite article seem thus to designate short-lived conditions, and this initial observation is confirmed by a tally of COCA data sets for five adjectives that most frequently co-occur with personal proper names and the indefinite article (see Table 1).

There is no question that *angry*, *smiling*, *beaming*, *relaxed* and *tired* all designate conditions that do not last long, and the preponderance of indefinite article use with proper names modified by these adjectives in COCA is massive, ranging from 73.6% to 93.0%. The temporary construal of a quality designated by an adjective may, however, also be cued by the context, e. g.:

- (10) A full two hours before Tsongas went on the air to declare victory, **a confident, beaming Clinton** stepped up before an enthusiastic crowd

of supporters to announce his second place “victory” and declare himself “The Comeback Kid.” [COCA]

- (11) The widely held belief is that Nixon’s fidgety, wooden style, and unkempt appearance in his first 1960 televised debate with **a relaxed, tanned, youthful looking John F. Kennedy** did him in. In their two follow-up debates, though, **a much better composed and relaxed Nixon** came off as having as good, if not better, command of the issues than Kennedy. [COCA]

Since (10) describes Clinton’s performance at a presidential campaign event, the qualities that are attributed to him on that occasion, designated by *confident* and *beaming*, may be taken to depict his upbeat mood just at this PR stunt, and the opening section of (11) leaves no doubt that the even longer strings of modifiers, i.e. *relaxed*, *tanned*, *youthful looking* and *much better composed and relaxed*, are intended to capture the appearance of John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon, respectively, only during their 1960 TV presidential debates. The modifiers *tanned*, *youthful looking* and *composed* certainly denote qualities that are longer lasting than fleeting moods, but in the context of a TV studio tan and youthful appearance may easily be enhanced by makeup artists and composure may be assumed on the advice of campaign managers. In other words, the qualities may be induced to produce an impression on the viewers but in fact last no longer than the debate, i.e. around two hours.

Another technology with the capability to produce the same effect is photography, e.g.:

- (12) For the last eight years, a corner coffee table in the chairman’s office at Augusta National held a framed photograph that illustrated the powerful heritage at the home of the Masters. It showed **a stone-faced Clifford Roberts** standing next to **a smiling Hootie Johnson**, both in their green jackets, the chairman in memoriam and the chairman emeritus, No. 1 and No. 5 in the 74-year lineage of the club. [COCA]

In official pictures individuals typically assume the facial expression dictated by the social conventions prevailing at a given time, e.g. a fairly stern one in early photographs and a grinning one nowadays, but the look lasts only until the photographer presses the shutter button and does not reveal much about

**Table 2.** Adjectives most frequently cooccurring with personal proper names and the definite article/no article in COCA

Total hits	a / an		Article use <i>the</i>		no article		Adjective modifying a personal proper name
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
	6,413	961	15.0	1,119	17.4	4,333	
7,203	32	0.4	368	5.1	6,803	94.5	<i>old</i>
64	7	10.9	50	78.2	7	10.9	<i>famous</i>
824	0	0.0	818	99.3	6	0.7	<i>great</i>
4,741	0	0.0	4,741	100.0	0	0.0	<i>late</i>

what such individuals actually are like on a daily basis. The context invoked in (12) again cues thus a temporary construal of the emotions designated by the modifiers. In the case of *smiling* it merely reaffirms its core designation of a fleeting facial expression, but in the case of *stone-faced* the contribution of the context to such a construal is much more significant.

The claim that the use of the indefinite article predominates in personal proper names taking modifiers that designate fleeting conditions is also corroborated by a comparison with the pattern that prevails when modified personal proper names take the definite article or no article at all (see Table 2). The time when people are young and old is usually measured in years, which leaves no doubt that both periods last significantly longer than the short-lived conditions discussed above, and the difference is duly reflected in article use. As shown in Table 2, when personal proper names are modified by the adjectives *young* and *old*, the frequency of indefinite article use drops from the sky-high levels reported in Table 1 down to the moderate values of 15.0% and 0.4%, respectively, and in both cases is lower than the figures for the definite article (17.4% and 5.1%, respectively). Both article options are dwarfed by the frequency of the no article pattern (67.6% and 94.5%, respectively), but inquiring into the reason underpinning its usage lies outside the scope of this paper. The key fact for the purpose at hand is that in the case of both adjectives the frequency of indefinite article use does not predominate any more and is lower than the frequency of using the definite article.

This tendency is even clearer in the remaining three data sets adduced in Table 2. While fame may occasionally be gained by fluke and quickly lost, in most cases it is a lasting condition that outlives most people who have

achieved it, and it is even more so with greatness, which has to be earned but continues for generations. Consequently, the use of the indefinite article with proper names modified by *famous* shrinks down to barely 10.9% of cases, and with *great* disappears altogether, with the definite article heavily dominating in both data sets.

The contrast with modifiers designating temporary conditions is even more stark in the case of *late*, which in an overwhelming majority of cases reported in Table 2 serves to signify that the referent of the modified proper name has passed away, e.g.:

- (13) Friday's release of the R&B musical remake *Sparkle* marks a bittersweet triumph for **the late Whitney Houston**, whose death in February preempted what many, including producing partner and friend Debra Martin Chase, insist would have been Houston's comeback. [COCA]

In any such cases the adjective designates thus the most durable human condition, which remains unchanged from death until resurrection, so it is no wonder that the frequency of indefinite article use in the pattern exemplified in (13) is down to zero again.

As has been noted by an anonymous reviewer, this pattern could be influenced by the correlation between article use and the choice of objective and subjective adjectives reported on in Vartiainen (2013). That paper shows that there are robust correlations between the subjectivity of adjectival modifiers and the use of the indefinite article, and, conversely, the objectivity of adjectival modifiers and the use of the definite article (Vartiainen 2013: 163–164). Vartiainen's study does not investigate proper name usages, but since some of the modifiers probed above, e.g. *young* and *old*, can be used both in subjective and objective senses, the impact of such a factor could account at least for some of the variation in article use noted in Table 2 and, at the same time, provide additional rationale for some of the more clear-cut cases. For instance, some of the adjectives shown above to invite the use of the indefinite article, e.g. *angry* or *tired*, can easily take the degree modifier *very*, which is a hallmark of the subjective construal (Vartiainen 2013: 165), while the condition designated by *late* in (13) and linked above with a starkly one-sided definite article pattern could not be more objective.

The only examples inviting less final readings of *late* pertain to career stages, e.g.:

- (14) Ms. ROBERTS: I think that actually the distinction is not between **the early Clinton** and **the late Clinton**, but between **the liberal Clinton** and **the middle-of-the-road Clinton**, and that what George was saying- Mr. DONALDSON: The middle of the road came late. [COCA]

Given the well-known facts that the length of the US presidential term is four years and that William J. Clinton served two of them, the time span that is divided in (14) into *the early Clinton* and *the late Clinton* or, somewhat more creatively, into *the liberal Clinton* and *the middle-of-the-road Clinton* totals 8 years, which is more than enough to make any of the periods designated by these modifiers last much longer than the fleeting conditions shown above to favor the use of the indefinite article.

However, the lengths of the periods are not stated in (14) and, as noted in the final comment, they were not in any way comparable, with the second, i. e. *the late Clinton* or *the middle-of-the-road Clinton*, significantly shorter. Technically, there might thus be a slim chance that the latter period could be really brief and challenge the claim that modifiers referring to short-lived conditions invite the use of the indefinite article, but any such suppositions are invalidated by two facts that override the question of the duration of the condition designated by a proper name modifier. These facts are that (i) the periods referred to in (14) are ordered (cf. the use of the adjectives *early* and *late*) and (ii) well-known, as they describe the track record of a US president, i. e. a referent whose performance may be safely expected to be familiar to any viewer of a CNN political show, where (14) comes from. Consequently, the referents of all four nominals in (14) are uniquely identifiable, which leads to the use of the definite article. An even more straightforward ordering is implied in (13), where death, designated by the use of *late*, inexorably follows life and the sequence is so well known that it leads to the use of the definite article no matter who the referent is, producing the remarkably uniform article pattern reported in Table 2.

Whether the sequence of the conditions designated by particular modifiers is openly stated, as in (14), or merely implied, as in (13), it is vital for article use because it is incompatible with an important corollary on the specifications of the indefinite article. As has been noted in § 3 above, the referent of an indefinite nominal is a member of a set comprising two or more elements that the speaker/writer can freely choose from, which implies that all such potential referents are available at the same time. Nominals whose referents

explicitly follow one another in a well-known order are thus incompatible with the indefinite construal and take the definite article as demonstrated in (13–14).

In other words, the tendency of the indefinite article to co-occur with personal proper names taking modifiers that designate short-lived conditions is not incidental but reflects an important intuition. If conditions last briefly and change quite unpredictably, e.g. a stone-faced expression can quickly melt into a smile, a grin can change into a frown in a split of a second, etc., the individual undergoing such quick transformations may be conceptualized as the locus of a number of alternative moods, views and emotions, i.e. an equivalent of a set of two or more potential referents that underlies the use of the indefinite article. In the classic scenario described in § 3 the speaker/writer chooses a single referent from such a set at will, which is rarely possible with emotional and physical conditions, but the fact that they change quite unpredictably may be taken to be an equivalent of such a free choice. The use of modifiers designating a variety of temporary conditions creates thus nominals that marginally meet the basic specifications of indefinite reference.

The pattern illustrated in (3–4) and (8–12) is indeed a borderline example of indefiniteness in that it presumes that free referent selection by the speaker may be viably replaced by fickle changes of the referent's moods, views and conditions, but with modifiers designating short-lived states and/or in contexts inducing such construals it is evidently tenable, while with modifiers denoting qualities that last longer and change rarely it is less and less likely to be the case until with *great* and *late*, as shown above, it becomes utterly impossible.

A side effect of the indefinite construal is that it may make the proper name referent look quite temperamental or even worse, e.g.:

- (15) Newsweek's Joe Klein wrote of the President's "multiple-personality disorder," involving **a moderate Clinton, a liberal Clinton**, and the likely suspect in the Whitewater inquiry, a pragmatic power politician who did whatever necessary to get and keep office in Arkansas... granting low-interest loans to not-very-needy business interests, who in turn contributed generously to his political campaigns. [COCA]

Since the indefinite construal of modified personal proper names relies on the assumption that the referent is the locus of a number of alternative moods, views and conditions that can surface at any time, it is an ideal grammatical device to describe unstable individuals, whether one is critical of their behavior, as in (15), or voices a more tolerant attitude, as in (16):

- (16) It seems clear that in the past there has been **a naughty Clinton** and **a pious Clinton**. This is not to suggest a schizoid personality. Like all human beings, he has his weaknesses and foibles. However, as president of the United States, these weaknesses and foibles tend to affect more people than do those of ordinary individuals. [COCA]

The corpus data surveyed above confirm thus the observation voiced in Van Langendonck (2007: 178) that the use of the indefinite article with non-metonymic personal proper names is correlated with transient conditions of the name bearer, while the use of the definite article corresponds with far more permanent states, but these tendencies do not reflect the operation of an article function as claimed by Van Langendonck, but are due to modifier choice and its match with the specifications of the definite or indefinite article. For a description of a related situation in German, where preceding a personal proper name with the definite article can convey the speaker's stance, cf. Betz (2015).

## 6 The indefinite article and geographical proper names

The motivation for the use of the indefinite article with modified geographical names is essentially the same as discussed above for personal proper names; however, it rests on a broader combination of grammatical and contextual factors because the referents of geographical names are not moody individuals with a penchant for displaying their emotions in public but far more impersonal entities. Since one of these factors is the time at which an example was produced, the data to be examined below, with one exception, will be drawn from COHA. For instance:

- (17) Pelletier does not want Canada to break up. He doesn't think **an independent Quebec** could survive as a small drop of French water in a vast American sea, and he is passionately attached to the idea of French Canadian survival. [COHA]
- (18) Both the Social Democratic and Labor Party and Sinn Fein advocate **a united Ireland**, but Sinn Fein backs the IRA's violent campaign against British rule of the province. [COHA]
- (19) "I stated to him our desire to see a peaceful evolution towards **a totally racially free South Africa**, a society without prejudice, a

society of total freedom,” Bush told reporters in the Rose Garden late Sunday afternoon. [COHA]

The choice of adjectives in (17–19) is quite different than in the personal proper names surveyed in the previous section, but that is only to be expected, as the referents of the modified geographical proper names are polities, namely Quebec in (17), Ireland in (18) and the Republic of South Africa in (19). Consequently, the qualities attributed to them are political in nature, namely independence in (17), unification in (18) and racial freedom in (19).

What is crucial, though, is the fact that the adjectives used in (17–19), i.e. *independent*, *united* and *free*, designate qualities that may be hard to win, but once obtained, typically last for years, which means, as has been shown in the previous section, that on their own they cannot be the triggers of the indefinite construals illustrated above. A critical factor that makes such construals possible is the choice of verbs and their dependents in the sentences that contain geographical proper names modified by such adjectives.

In (17) a politician thinks about the future of an independent Quebec, in (18) three political parties advocate a united Ireland and in (19) the US president desires to see a peaceful evolution towards a totally racially free South Africa. In other words, the conditions designated by the adjectives *independent*, *united* and *free* are not factual but are, respectfully, thought about, advocated and desired through a peaceful evolution, which means that they all designate goals to be achieved in the future. Setting such goals implies, though, that at the time of speaking the polities that are referred to, namely Quebec, Ireland and the Republic of South Africa, subsist in conditions that are perhaps best described by the antonyms of the adjectives actually used in (17–19), e.g.: *dependent*, *divided* and *unfree*.

The choice of specific adjectives to capture the implied present condition of the referent may vary, depending on the views of the speaker, but what is vital for the indefinite construal of the nominals *an independent Quebec*, *a united Ireland* and *a totally racially free South Africa* is the fact that the sentential context in which they are framed leaves no doubt that in each case there are at least two referents to choose from: Quebec as a province of Canada and an independent Quebec in (17), Ireland divided between two countries and a united Ireland in (18), the Republic of South Africa devoid of racial freedom and a racially free South Africa in (19). That is crucial because it makes the nominals in question truly indefinite and paves the way for the use of the indefinite article. As has been noted in § 4 and reiterated in the previous

one, the referent of an indefinite nominal is a member of a set comprising two or more elements that the speaker/writer can freely choose from, and now, thanks to the joint contributions of the proper name modifiers, the verbs and their dependents, that is really the case.

It is, obviously, a borderline case of indefiniteness again, as the existence of one of the potential referents has to be inferred and the other one is imaginary. However, indefinite construal does not depend on the factual status of referents or the extent to which they are explicitly mentioned in a text, and the unusual scenario where all the potential referents are inferred and imagined makes it only easier to assume that they are available at the same time for the speaker/writer to choose from.

The array of nouns and verbs capable of producing such a contextual effect in tandem with appropriate adjectives is obviously much broader than exemplified above, e. g.:

- (20) As early as 1910 Pianist Paderewski, then at the early zenith of his musical career, proclaimed: “The **vision of a strong and independent Poland** has always been the lodestar of my existence. Its realization is still the great aim of my life!” [COHA]
- (21) At this year’s meeting, the federation issued a number of political resolutions, including **calling for** the establishment of **an independent Palestine** by May 1999 in line with the Oslo accords, as well as a request to lift the Iraqi embargo. [COHA]

Whether it is the prolix combination of the adjectives *independent* and *strong* with the nouns *vision*, *realization* and *aim* in (20), or the much more plain co-occurrence of the verb *call for* with the noun *establishment* in (21), they easily yield sets of alternative referents that make it possible to precede both modified proper names with the indefinite article.

As might be expected, the same result can also be naturally achieved by resorting to modal verbs, e. g.:

- (22) It was felt by the Moslem population that **an independent India would be dominated** by Hindu interests at the expense of the Moslems and that a separate Islamic state must be created at the time of independence. [COHA]
- (23) If people have a problem with defining a new American identity – and many people do obviously on the part of any particular group, in

this case, Spanish-speaking individuals – they really have a problem with the second part of this subtitle, “in the Spanish-Speaking United States”. “There are those who **will argue** that you **can’t have a Spanish-speaking United States.**” [COHA]

In (22) it is *would* alone that evokes an alternative future possibility from a reported past perspective, while in (23) the use of *can’t* is buttressed by *will* and *argue* in a direct speech excerpt, but the result is the same and paves the way for the use of the indefinite article as explained above.

The same outcome can obviously follow from the use of conditional clauses, e.g.:

- (24) The economic impact of peace in Algeria probably would be less in France than has been anticipated, particularly **if a politically independent Algeria retains** some special economic links with Paris. [COHA]
- (25) South African government spokesmen deny they have any plans for independence for Namibia without UN recognition. But Dr. Viljoen repeatedly has stated that **if South Africa were forced to choose** between international recognition for **an independent Namibia** and internal stability in the territory, **it would choose** the latter. [COHA]

Whether it is the first conditional in (24) or the second one in (25), they both serve their basic function of designating alternative scenarios, which, when applied to proper name referents, produces the same grammatical consequences as described above.

Finally, indefinite construals can also be triggered by relative clauses, e.g.:

- (26) And I want to know what both of you think is the future of your country. Ligrig, starting with you: Do you see that you’ll be going home to **a Kosovo that is still part of Yugoslavia, a Kosovo that is aligned with Albania, or a Kosovo that’s altogether independent?** [COHA]

Each of the relative clauses in (26) offers more detail on possible future developments in Kosovo than a typical adjective can, but that makes the inferences underlying the indefinite construal only easier to make.

The use of the indefinite article with modified geographical names is coordinated, though, with one more critical contextual factor. As can be

easily noted in a historical corpus like COHA, the incidence of such indefinite nominals is not random but strongly concentrated in some time periods.

A typical example is Poland. Out of 13 hits for *independent Poland* in COHA 10 are preceded by the indefinite article and all 10 cluster in the years that were critical for the struggle for Polish independence. It was regained late in 1918 after a period of 123 years, when the country had been partitioned by rapacious neighbors, and then lost again in 1939 at the outset of World War Two, and these upheavals are closely shadowed by the timing of the indefinite usages. Four of them date from the period 1916–1919, four more come from the years 1940–1945, and two cases date from 1932 and 1995 but come from historical narratives referring back to the two previous times of struggle and their consequences, respectively.

The data for Poland and twelve other polities are summarized in Table 3 and commented on below. Since the numbers of hits are quite low, ranging from 67 to 4, two other modifiers besides *independent* were selected, and the items with the highest frequencies are reported. The figures for *America* and *USA* have been added up and are reported under the heading *USA*, as all the tokens of both search entries refer to the same country.

The pattern is remarkably regular, as in each case indefinite usages clearly cluster in the years critical for seeking independence or reunification. In the case of India it was a long and peaceful struggle against the British Empire that led to independence in 1947, and all COHA indefinite usages come from the period 1928–1946. For Ukraine it was a two-stage event: a short spell of revolutionary independence in 1918–1921 quenched by its neighbors, followed by declaring independence on the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, and half of COHA indefinite usages come from sources referring to either of these periods, which is the lowest figure in Table 3. For Algeria it was a guerilla war against the French Republic fought between 1954–1962, with all COHA indefinite examples coming from the years 1960–1962, while for Ireland it was a protracted struggle with the British Empire that culminated in 1921, with all COHA indefinite examples covering the period 1881–1921. Singapore gained independence quite unexpectedly in 1965 after a series of riots saw it expelled from Malaysia, and all COHA indefinite usages come from that fateful year, while both Zimbabwe and Namibia fought long guerilla wars against White-dominated governments of Rhodesia (1965–1980) and South Africa (1966–1990), and all COHA indefinite examples come from the years 1977–1979 and 1979–1990, respectively.

**Table 3.** Article use with modified geographical proper names and the adjectives *independent*, *divided* and *united* in COHA, including the proportion of indefinite article usage in the times that were critical for the independence, division or reunification of selected polities

Total hits	Article use								Adjective	Polity
	Indefinite article		Indefinite article in critical time		Definite article		No article			
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%		
15	8	53.3	8	100.0	1	6.7	6	40.0	<i>independent</i>	India
13	10	77.0	10	100.0	1	7.6	2	15.4	<i>independent</i>	Poland
12	2	16.6	2	100.0	2	16.6	8	66.6	<i>independent</i>	USA
9	6	66.7	3	50.0	1	11.1	2	22.2	<i>independent</i>	Ukraine
7	5	71.4	5	100.0	2	28.6	0	0.0	<i>independent</i>	Algeria
5	5	100.0	5	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	<i>independent</i>	Ireland
5	5	100.0	5	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	<i>independent</i>	Quebec
5	2	40.0	2	100.0	0	0.0	3	60.0	<i>independent</i>	Singapore
4	4	100.0	4	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	<i>independent</i>	Zimbabwe
4	3	75.0	3	100.0	1	25.0	0	0.0	<i>independent</i>	Namibia
20	15	75.0	14	93.3	5	25.0	0	0.0	<i>divided</i>	Germany
4	4	100.0	4	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	<i>divided</i>	Korea
67	54	80.6	39	72.2	4	6.0	9	13.4	<i>united</i>	Germany

Perhaps even more compelling evidence comes from the comparison of the data sets for *USA* and *Quebec*. The USA gained independence as a result of the American Revolutionary War that officially ended in 1783, while the time span covered by COHA begins in the 1820s, i.e. well after the time that was critical for American independence was over, which means that tokens of *independent America* and *independent USA* produced in the years covered by COHA should be preceded by the definite article or no article at all but not by the indefinite article if the claim advanced above is correct, and that is indeed the case. All eight tokens of *independent America*, spanning the period from 1837 to 2000, take no article, and two tokens of *independent USA* (from 1889 and 1962) take the definite article. However, in two examples coming from historical narratives discussing the times of the American Revolution, published in 1978 and 2006, respectively, the indefinite article is used, e.g.:

- (27) Beset by severe food shortages, weighed down by taxes, resentful of royal absolutism and inspired by the egalitarian example of **an independent United States**, French citizens were growing increasingly vocal in their demands for self-government. [COHA]

In contrast, Quebec is a Canadian province, and the question of its independence remains an issue that is raised every couple of years by firebrand politicians but has so far not passed beyond the stage of two closely contested referendums in 1980 and 1995, eventually won by those who opposed Quebec's secession. For those who dream of Quebecois independence the time that is critical for obtaining that goal is then not yet over, and that is reflected in article use, as all the COHA tokens of *independent Quebec* take the indefinite article.

In the case of countries that were divided and sought reunification the pattern is basically the same. Germany was divided between 1945 and 1990, and 14 out of 15 indefinite usages of *divided Germany* (93.3%) fit into that period, while Korea was divided as a result of a war fought in 1950–1953, and all 4 indefinite examples of *divided Korea* in COHA come from the years 1950–1954. German reunification was similarly an open question between 1945 and 1990, and 72.2% of all indefinite usages of *united Germany* date from that time span, with the majority of the rest concentrating in the period preceding the previous reunification of 1870 (11.1%) and in the years immediately following the end of World War One, when technically Germany was not divided but the indefinite examples refer to plans and dreams of regaining the territories ceded to France, Poland or Lithuania as a result of the Paris Peace Treaty (9.2%).

The pattern is, then, highly consistent and corroborates the claim that the adjectives that participate in triggering indefinite construals of proper names that refer to polities in fact designate the goals of people and movements that seek independence, oppose divisions, fight for reunification, etc. When such lofty goals are finally reached, it is only natural to expect that they are not discussed much anymore except in historical narratives, and, as shown above, the indefinite usages disappear in step with the accomplishment of such momentous political changes. The fact that indefinite uses of modified geographical proper names are not distributed evenly on a timeline but visibly cluster in periods critical for the history of their referents provides thus strong support for the explanation argued for above.

Once historic changes are accomplished, article usage returns thus back to normal; e.g. the countries listed in Table 3 are simply referred to as *Poland*, *India*, *Algeria*, *Ireland*, *the USA* etc., even if an adjective is used to underscore the importance of the transition, e.g.:

- (28) An example is **newly independent Namibia**, where a pro-Marxist liberation movement dominated by the Ovambo tribe won a parliamentary majority last year but pledged to maintain a market economy and shares power with parties representing 13 other ethnic groups. [COHA]
- (29) It was not foreseen that within a century the dealings of Great Britain with **the independent United States** would far exceed her dealings with the rest of the world. [COHA]

As has been claimed above, on their own adjectives cannot trigger indefinite construals of geographical proper names, and in order to do so they have to co-occur with nouns and verbs designating goals and visions for the future. However, after the goals and visions have been accomplished (cf. the use of *newly* in (28) and the one hundred year time span from independence in (29) above), no such vocabulary is used and the construal remains definite, which offers one more piece of evidence in support of the account argued for in this section.

In a much smaller batch of examples the mechanism underlying the indefinite construal of modified geographical proper names is a bit simpler, e.g.:

- (30) “This is not Russia on its knees in the mid-1990s. This is **a Russia that thinks they can go their own way now**,” says Michael McFaul, a Stanford University professor and occasional adviser to the Bush administration. “People in the Kremlin today are just not that interested in becoming part of the West.” [COHA]
- (31) “Not only is Mexico doing better, macroeconomically speaking, than the false stereotypes would have us think, Mexico is actually doing better than the United States,” said Richard Fisher, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, who applauds Mexico for controlling inflation, balancing budgets and managing debt. Fisher grew up in Mexico City in the 1950s and remembers **a Mexico that “was our soft underbelly, a country of tremendous poverty**

**and horribly bad governments.”** Now Fisher and his peers praise Mexico for pouring billions of pesos into infrastructure, including ports, railroads, refineries and highways. [COHA]

Both examples are framed in present and/or past tenses and use vocabulary that is fully factual, which leaves no doubt that (30–31) do not project any future visions of Russia and Mexico, respectively, but comment on facts. In (30) these comments pertain to a situation from early 2000s, while in (31) a bit more distant past is compared with the present, but in both cases it is clear that the indefinite proper name usages designate stages in the history of a country. In (30) a feisty period is identified, i. e. *a Russia that thinks they can go their own way now*, and is set against a more timid time prevailing in the history of that country in mid-1990s, while (31) distinguishes a profligate stage in Mexican history designated by the lengthy indefinite nominal *a Mexico that “was our soft underbelly, a country of tremendous poverty and horribly bad governments”*, and a more prosperous one that is implied to prevail nowadays.

Such historical stages are clearly ordered and, as has been noted in discussing examples (13–14) in the previous section, that is one of the factors underlying definite construals of non-metonymic modified proper names. However, as has been emphasized in analyzing those examples, in order to trigger definite construals the temporal divisions designated by nominals have to be known to the addressees well enough to be identifiable, and that is not the case in (30–31). The historical periods referred to in (30–31) are informal and based on personal insights of the speakers, i. e. a Stanford professor in (30) and a Federal Reserve Bank president in (31). The former draws on his lifelong study of Russia and the latter on his reminiscences of living in Mexico, but both formulate their private views, concocting ad hoc divisions that match the context and their own experience but are new to the hearers/readers. The non-metonymic modified proper names used in (30–31) match thus the specifications of indefinite reference with flying colors: each of them refers to one of a number of stages in the history of a country, i. e. to one referent from a set of at least two, and each of these items is new to the addressees, which is more than enough to use the indefinite article.

The usages illustrated in (30–31) rely heavily on postmodifiers, but that is not a rule, and the same construal can easily be achieved with premodifiers, as shown below by a somewhat extreme example drawn from a tourist guide:

- (32) There was **a Roman York** (Hadrian came this way) then **a Saxon York, a Danish York, a Norman York** (William the Conqueror slept here), **a medieval York, a Georgian York, a Victorian York** (a center a flourishing rail business), and certainly **a 20 th. – century York**. (Porter 1985: 544)

The example is exceptional in that it subsumes as many as eight indefinite usages of a modified geographical name in the span of a single sentence, listing in that way 8 distinct stages in the history of York in northern England. The rationale behind all these indefinite construals is, though, essentially the same as in (30–31) and betrayed by the genre of the book the example is culled from. Since it is a guidebook, it is based on the assumption that its author has already been to York and seen the sights but the readers have not done so yet. Consequently, the construal of the labels the author coined to sort York historical sites into 8 historical sets on the basis of his experience has to be indefinite.

Ultimately, the indefinite usages in (30–32) are thus fundamentally similar to those discussed earlier on in this section in that all of them refer to stages in the history of a polity or city. The only major difference is that in (17–27) the referents of all such stages were implicit and had to be inferred from a combination of contextual clues, whereas in (30–32), due to their factual status, the stages are referred to far more explicitly and are either simply listed, as in (30) and (32), or only one of them needs to be inferred, as in (31).

## 7 Conclusions

The paper has explored the rationale behind the use of the indefinite article with non-metonymic modified English proper names and has shown that in such cases it is used under the same conditions as elsewhere in English, i.e. if a singular countable nominal refers to one referent freely selected by the speaker/writer from a set comprising at least two items. In the case of personal proper names it is made possible by modifiers designating temporary conditions of the referent that may surface at any time, and in the case of geographical proper names by two sets of contexts: a more frequent one, in which the speaker/writer outlines a desired future situation of a polity, and a more rare one, in which an ad hoc division of the history of a geographical entity into two or more stages is created.

Modifying a personal proper name with an adjective designating a transient condition makes it possible to conceptualize the referent as the locus of alternative moods, views and emotions, i.e. as an equivalent of a set of two or more potential referents, and the free choice of such items by the speaker/writer may be approximated by the fact that the conditions denoted by the modifiers change quite unpredictably. In a similar fashion, framing a geographical proper name in a sentence referring to a future condition of a polity creates an implied contrast with the current one, which gives the speaker/writer a choice from a set of two items, and the same is even more explicitly the case if two or more historical stages of the referent are identified.

All three scenarios thus meet the basic specifications of indefinite reference in that they ensure that there is a number of potential referents to choose from and their construal depends on contextual considerations, which confirms that non-metonymic modified proper names taking the indefinite article indeed refer to particular name bearer manifestations as noted in Payne & Huddleston (2002: 521), i.e. to spatial-temporal slices or aspects of the entity bearing a proper name as they have been more vividly defined in Matushansky (2015: 4). Consequently, the evidence examined in the paper refutes the claim that modified proper names taking the indefinite article remain definite and should be treated on a par with any other proper names, as argued in Van Langendonck (2007: 176) and in Van Langendonck & Van de Velde (2016: 17) and presumed in a number of earlier publications, e.g. Hewson (1972) or Berezowski (2001). Furthermore, a corollary of the finding that there are proper name usages that marginally meet the standard conditions for the selection of the indefinite article is that in any such contexts the definite and indefinite articles are not freely interchangeable and the use of the indefinite one is substantially more frequent. Consequently, the assumption underlying the analysis of non-metonymic modified proper names in Payne & Huddleston (2002), Matushansky (2006; 2008; 2015), and von Heusinger & Wespel (2007), i.e. the assumption that in modified proper names there is no difference between choosing the definite or indefinite article, is untenable.

In the case of personal proper names this conclusion is corroborated by showing that they tend to be given indefinite construals when they are modified by adjectives designating short-lived conditions, e.g. *angry*, *relaxed*, *smiling*, etc., while definite construals predominate when the modifiers denote more permanent states, e.g. *famous*, *great*, etc. The examination of corpus data has thus confirmed the observation noted in Van Langendonck (2007: 178). In the case of geographical proper names framed in contexts

designating future conditions of polities that are sought after by a variety of movements and individuals, it was likewise shown that the indefinite article tends to be used when such goals are actively pursued. When they are reached, the use of articles reverts to the standard pattern, whether the proper names are modified or not, i.e. no article, e.g. *Poland, newly united Germany*, or the definite one, e.g. *the UK, the independent United States*, as the case may be. In modified geographical proper names that refer to historical stages of cities and polities, it was furthermore demonstrated that the indefinite article tends to be selected when the division into periods is novel and not yet known to the addressees.

The use of articles with non-metonymic modified proper names is thus governed by quite distinct but testable conditions that are laid out by the interaction of the contextual factors described in detail in the two previous sections and summarized above.

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**Contact information:**

Leszek Berezowski  
Institute of English Studies  
University of Wrocław  
Kuznicza 22  
50-138 Wrocław  
Poland  
e-mail: leszek(dot)berezowski(at)uwr(dot)edu(dot)pl