

The Meaning behind the Form: The English Article

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This paper argues that a satisfactory description of the grammar of a language can only be achieved if the concepts behind the rules of usage are given primary consideration. As a demonstration of this approach, an analysis of the English article is given, based on the meanings expressed by the article forms. Finally, an “inexplicable” usage of the article is elucidated with reference to the previous analysis.

The study of grammar has traditionally been and still is largely the study of syntax, for syntax is considered “the core of grammar” (Chalker 1984: 7). Of course, meaning has also been discussed, but almost always as secondary to the form. Satisfactory description has been the goal of grammatical analysis, with much less concern for satisfactory explanations. Grammar books of any kind tend to begin a section with a sentence such as “A/an is only used when the head of the noun phrase is a singular count noun” (Chalker 1984: 52). The rules come first, and the reasons, such as they are understood, come after (for rare exception, see Lewis 1986). This paper is an attempt to demonstrate what happens if we reverse this order of priorities.

The English Article has been chosen as the subject of the demonstration because this grammatical category has traditionally been one of the most troublesome to descriptive grammarians. The rules of usage are considered complex and often idiomatic. Yet, by analysing the concepts that give rise to the different usages of the article, it can be seen that the rules of usage are actually straightforward, and much of what was previously found arbitrary and inexplicable can be accounted for.

The article in English

Articles are generally considered to be the “three little words” - a, an, the - that go before nouns (Brender 1989). In one sense, however, there is no such category. On examination, we see that what are called “articles” are actually a collapse of two distinct word categories : quantifiers (which show how many) and determiners (which specify) (Whitman 1974: 254). Articles are also found in two different usages of nouns: particular and general (Swan 1980: 67, 68). It is when we look at these categories separately that we can begin to tease out the knots.

Quantifiers - talking about how many

The common noun in English essentially expresses an abstract concept : *chair* or *orange*

or *water* for example. One way to “concretize” the concept is to say how many you are talking about, and the words that do that are called quantifiers. As would be expected with words that denote quantity, there are both singular and plural quantifiers. The singular quantity word has three forms : *a*, *an* and *one*. Historically, *a* and *an* are reduced, unstressed forms of *one*. If you say *one orange* quickly, you’ll see how *an* came into being. Rather than, as the rule says, “*a* changes to *an* in front of a vowel sound,” it is historically more accurate to say it happened the other way round, with *an* getting further reduced in front of a consonant (Peters 1989: 58). *One chair* to *an chair* to a *chair*.

A is used before consonant *sounds*, and *an* before vowel *sounds* because it’s easier to say that way. Thus, a few words beginning with vowels in writing (but not in speech) take *a* and vice versa (Swan 1980: 64). For example,

a unit
a one-woman show
an honor
an hour

But “aiches” can be dropped, and this has led to some confusion. Is it *a hotel* or *an hotel*? The answer is it can be either, depending on how you pronounce it (Woods & McLeod 1990: 160).

A and *an* mean exactly what they are : unstressed *one*, and are used when the quantity is singular but there is no need to stress that. *One* itself, the third singular quantifier, is used in situations where the speaker/writer wants to add clarity, stress or contrast (Blissett & Hallgarten 1985: 62).

Customer : “I’d like *a* hamburger, and some fries,”
Clerk (checking) : “*One* hamburger with fries coming up.”

The rest of the quantifiers are words that denote more than one. These include all the plural numbers from two up, and words like *some*, *several*, *many*, *all*, *a lot of*... Certain of these words (*some*, *a lot of*, *much*...) are used with uncountable nouns to denote a certain quantity of that noun.

To sum up, quantifiers are used to show how many or how much of a thing we are talking about :

I think there’s *a* mouse in my kitchen. (I have reason to believe there is only one.)

I'm sure there's only *one* mouse, not more. (Stress produces the *one*.)

The cat caught *some* mice yesterday. (An unknown number -more than one.)

I'd like *some* water. (An uncountable amount.)

Determiners – talking about which ones

Nouns are “concretized” when you quantify them, and they are also concretized when you talk about a specific example or examples of that noun. Words that specify (determine) which particular noun you are referring to are called determiners, and they restrict the noun to specific example(s) of that noun. Apart from the article *the*, determiners include words like *this* and *that*, as well as *my*, *your* and the other possessive adjectives. The possessive 's as in *Mary's house* in fact derives from *the house of Mary* where the determining element of the possessive is explicit (Whitman 1970: 255).

Determiners often add extra information at the same time as specifying. *My*, for example, is a determiner that is also a possessive. *My car* is a) a specific car that b) belongs to me. *This* and *that* specify what is being talked about while also implying proximity in space or time. Alone among the determiners, *the* does not add meaning at the same time as specifying. In the same way that *a/an* derives from *one*, *the* is a reduction of *this*. Having lost its reference to nearness in space or time, *the* is a neutral determiner, specifying and nothing more (Whitman 1970: 254).

Determiners, then, show that a particular thing is being talked about, but there is an additional implicit assumption. When speakers or writers refer to particular thing, they are assuming that the listeners/readers also know of the particular things being referred to. *On the way home, I met the dog* is meaningless to a reader who doesn't already somehow know about the dog in question. This is a second concept behind the use of determiners: the thing being talked about is known to both speaker and listener (Grannis 1972: 288).

Look, there's *the* mouse. (The one you told me about.)

I found *a* wallet... I gave *the* wallet to the police. (*The* because it is now “the one we are talking about.”)

Another common reason for knowing which one is being talked about is that, in the context of the communication, there *is* only one (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1983: 177).

The moon is full. (There's only one - it's unique.)

The president waved at the crowd. (He or she is the only one.)

It was *the* best movie I've ever seen. (There's only one "best.")

Names and articles

When you name something, you are particularizing that thing as much as you do when you attach a determiner to a common noun. Naming something means that thing is unique in its context, and it ordinarily doesn't need to be further specified, for example,

Michael Lewis

There are also cases in which a common noun describes a name, and in doing so, is considered part of the name:

President Anwar el-Sadat ; Lake Erie

and there are cases where a name and the common noun specified by the name are considered as one unit:

Madison Avenue ; Christmas Day

Usually, however, a common noun is conceived as retaining its separate identity even when involved in a name. For example, we do not think of **Mississippi River* or **River Mississippi*, that is, a portmanteau name which emphasizes *Mississippi* as much as *River*. Rather we see it, first, as a river. Which river? *The* river that we call Mississippi: the Mississippi River, or the Mississippi for short. Similarly,

the Andes (Mountains) ; the Ritz Hotel ; the River Thames (Br.E)

Names, by definition, mean that something is unique in its context, but there are times when we need to question, clarify or emphasize that uniqueness, and we do so by using *the* to further specify the name (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1983 : 174).

That's not *the* Michael Lewis, is it? (i.e., the Michael Lewis who wrote *The English Verb* as opposed to some other, unknown Michael Lewis.)

You mean you stayed in *the* Raffles Hotel? (i.e., the one and only famous Raffles Hotel.)

When determiners and quantifiers meet

There is a third aspect of meaning to be found in determiners. At the same time as specifying “the one(s) being talking about,” they imply “*all* of the one(s) being talked about.” In other words, when a determiner is used, there is the added implicit meaning of “all of it/the group” (Whitman 1974: 256).

I sold *my* cars. (all of them)

I'll send you *the* information. (all of it)

I ate Mary's cake. (the whole cake, or all of her serving)

Conversely, if you are *not* referring to “all of the group,” you add a quantifier which restricts the meaning by saying how many of “all” you are referring to:

I ate *some* of Mary's cake.

Three of *the* teams were disqualified.

In other cases, quantifiers are added to indicate or stress how many “all” is.

The two teams played each other. (to show or stress that all=two)

This even happens when “all” is obviously “one,” should we wish to stress the singularity.

You're *the one* person I never expected to meet here.

The stress context produces *one* rather than *a/an*, which is why *the* and *a/an* are never found together.

Articles with nouns in a general (generic) sense

As asserted earlier, common nouns, when unqualified, express abstract/general/class concepts, for example,

The plants need __ water. (water in general)

“I am __ woman.” (woman, the abstract concept)

__ Dolphins are playful creatures. (dolphins as a class - any and all)

and we have seen how nouns are concretized or particularized by a determiner or quantifier.

The plants need *some* water. (a specific amount of actual water)
I am *a* woman. (one actual member of the class “woman”)
The dolphins at Seaworld are playful. (particular dolphins)

But, as stated at the beginning of the paper, articles are also involved when nouns are used in a general rather than a particular sense, for example,

A dolphin is a playful creature.
The dolphin is a playful creature.

The particularizing articles notwithstanding, sentences like the above seem closer in meaning to the general *— Dolphins are playful creatures* than to the particular *I saw a dolphin* or *The dolphins at Seaworld are playful*. In fact, they do refer to the general, but *by way of* the particular. More exactly, they are talking about the general class/concept from the point of view of concrete or particular examples of the class. Traditional grammar calls this a generic usage (Grannis 1972: 282).

A mouse is a cute, furry creature is obviously talking about mice in general, not one particular mouse, as in, for example, *I saw a mouse*. But in the sense that *A mouse is a cute, furry creature* still refers to a singular example, it is the same usage of *a* as *I saw a mouse*, with context alone giving a particular or general reference. Both mean one mouse, but, whereas *I saw a mouse* means *one particular* mouse located in space and time by its context, *A mouse is a cute, furry creature* means *any one* actual mouse, in the sense that one mouse can be taken as fairly representative of all mice. This usage does, however, require a typical mouse. We cannot, for example, say, **A mouse is white*, given that mice also come in various other colors.

The mouse is a cute, furry creature, on the other hand, means the average mouse. We think of all mice, then take the median, the average mouse that represents all mice. There can only be one such average, hypothetical mouse, hence the use of *the*, and its use with the singular *mouse*, not *mice*.

The difference between the generic *a mouse* and *the mouse* is made more explicit by the following example. We could say,

The Canadian family consists of 3.67 persons.

The Canadian family... here is the median, hypothetical one, derived from all the existing ones, but not actually itself existing except as a hypothetical construct (Whitman 1774: 258). That's why we don't say, **A* (i.e. any one actual) *Canadian family consists*

of 3.67 persons.

Summary

Articles are part of two separate categories of word, both of which make concrete the abstract/general/class essence of common nouns. The first category, quantifiers, states how much/many of the noun is being referred to. There are three singular quantifiers: *a*, *an*, and the stressed *one*. The use of *a* or *an* depends on the initial vowel or consonant sound of the word that follows. Plural quantifiers include numbers from two up, and words like *some*, *much*, and *many*. The second category of word to which articles belong is determiners, which refer to specific members of the noun class. The most common determiner is *the*. Other determiners add extra meaning while specifying, such as possessive adjectives (e.g. *my* and *'s*), and words indicating proximity in time or space (e.g. *this* and *that*). When a determiner is used, it assumes shared knowledge of the determined noun by both speaker/writer and listener/reader. Reasons for this shared knowledge of the noun include previous mention and uniqueness by context. Context can also allow reference to the whole class of noun through particular examples of the class, as in, for example, *A dolphin is a playful creature* and *The dolphin is a playful creature*. These generic usages refer to any one typical representative member of the class, and the one median hypothetical member of the class respectively.

The following phrases and sentences illustrate the different uses (and non-uses) of articles examined in this paper.

A : Quantifying

1. I think there's *a* mouse in my kitchen. (I have reason to believe there is only one.)
2. I'm sure there's only *one* mouse, not more. (Stress produces the *one*.)
3. The cat caught *some* mice yesterday. (A certain number - more than one.)

B : Determining

4. I found *a* wallet... I gave *the* wallet to the police. (*The* because it is now "the one we are talking about.")
5. *The* moon is full. (There's only one -it's unique.)
6. *Your* money. Tony's house. *This* one. (There are other determiners besides *the*.)

C : Talking about things in general

7. I am woman. (General usage, embodying the essence of womanhood. This usage

is rare, but particularly useful as a contrast in helping students build the concept of when and why articles *are* used.)

8. ___ Mice are cute, furry creatures. (No determiner or quantifier, therefore retaining general meaning.)

9. A mouse is a cute, furry creature. (As in 1. above, but by context a generic sense - any one typical, representative mouse.)

10. The mouse is a cute, furry creature. (As in 5. above, but by context a generic sense - the average, hypothetical mouse.)

Putting concepts to the test

Recently, one of our most respected grammarians wrote a letter to a language teaching journal in which he detailed several problems of usage “which I cannot work out to my own satisfaction (and which are not adequately covered in the reference books I have consulted)” (Swan 1990: 254). One of these problems concerned articles, and is reproduced below :

1 Dear Jake,

Thanks very much for sending me a/the copy of your book.

2 Dear Jake,

*Thanks very much for the copy of your book. (Not *...a copy...)*

Why is the indefinite article possible in the first case but not the second? (Swan 1990: 255).

In terms of the analysis presented in this paper, the above problem seems relatively straightforward to explain. In 1, *a copy* would mean one copy, while *the copy* would mean “the specific copy that you sent.” In 2, *the copy* specifies a particular copy because there is shared knowledge of it between Jake and the letter writer. When you thank someone for a gift, that gift must obviously be known to both giver and receiver. In 2, **a copy* is strange because it flies in the face of this necessary-by-context shared knowledge of the gift. The context (i.e., thanking for a gift) requires a form to reflect shared knowledge: a determiner such as *the*. If a quantifier were used, it would have to be stressed, such as a sarcastic *one copy* to show Jake you expected ten. And, even then, it would most likely be written together with a determiner: *the one copy*. An easier context in which to see the context of shared knowledge is, *Goodbye, and thanks for the (*a) cup of coffee.*”

The ability of a meaning driven analysis to account for an otherwise distressing problem

says much for the value of such an analysis. The reasons behind the continuing prominence given in grammatical analysis to form over meaning may be historical, rooted in traditions of linguistics that go back several centuries (Richards & Rodgers 1986: 2). Language rules may describe usage, but they do not represent the thought processes that produced those usages (Seliger 1979). It has been noted that abstract rules can strike "terror" not only in students but in teachers (Wajnryb 1990). By first examining the concepts of meaning (the thought processes that produce the forms), however, rules of usage are seen to have a concrete basis. I believe this is a change of emphasis in grammatical analysis that is long overdue.

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