

The Article System in English:

Some Implications for the Japanese ELT Classroom

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1. Introduction

The English article system is problematic for English as a second language (L2) learner's (Chuang, 2005; Milton, 2001; Ogawa, 2008; Papp, 2004). There are two key reasons for this. Firstly, articles may not be part of a student's first language, and the student may be unable to transfer use/rules from their first language to English. Secondly, although students may know many "rules" regarding article use, they may not understand how to interpret these rules in different written and spoken contexts. This is because article use in English is connected with noun use and L2 students have great difficulty, amongst other factors, determining whether a noun is countable or uncountable, or whether it is being mentioned for the first time. Indeed, Swan (2005) states: "The correct use of the articles (*a/an* and *the*) is one of the most difficult points in English grammar" (p.54). Article use is particularly challenging for Japanese learners because the Japanese language does not contain them (Akakura, 2012; Taferner, 2015).

This paper briefly explores article use in English and explains why different nouns use different articles and how the meaning of a phrase can be modified by article use. The paper then focuses on the implications and challenges of article use for Japanese L2 learners. In order to do this, aspects of the Japanese language are briefly considered, and first language (L1) interference is discussed as a factor in the acquisition and use of articles by Japanese users of English.

2. Determining the Determiner

Models of grammatical description, (Swan, 2004; Quirk et al., 1985) classify articles as the primary *determiners*, reasoning that they ‘determine’ the definiteness of the noun phrase. For the purpose of this paper Crystal’s (1985) term ‘determiner’ is understood as:

Referring to a class of ITEMS whose main role is to COOCCUR with NOUNS to express a wide range of SEMANTIC contrasts, such as QUANTITY or NUMBER. The ARTICLES, when they occur in a LANGUAGE, are the main set of determiners (e.g. *the /a* in English); other words which have a determiner function in English include *each/every, this/that, some/any*, all of which have a distribution which includes the article position, e.g. *the/ this/ some ...cake* (p.90).

Grammarians, such as Quirk et al. (1985), divide determiners into three categories; predeterminers, central determiners, and postdeterminers. Central determiners include articles and will be discussed in more detail later. Before this, it is useful to briefly look at the other two categories to better understand the subject.

As the name suggests, predeterminers usually occur before central determiners. Quantifying words including *both*, in (1) *both those bicycles* and *all*, in (2) *all (the) policemen*, are classed as pre-determiners. The multipliers *twice* and *double* are further examples of predeterminers as in (3) *double the odds* or (4) *twice the time*. Also, the words *that* and *what* are used as predeterminers offering contrast in phrases like (5) *that’s a pity* and (6) *what a great idea*. Typically, predeterminers cannot be used in combination, so the phrase, (7) **both all policeman*, is not possible, for example.

Postdeterminers follow predeterminers or central determiners but precede other premodifiers like adjectives. They include cardinal and ordinal numerals such as *two* and *first*; (8) *my two dogs (cardinal)*, (9) *my first dog (ordinal)*. Also, closed class quantifiers including *few*, (10) *a few minutes* and *several*, (11) *several hours*, and open class quantifiers consisting chiefly of nouns of quantity such as *great*, (12) *a great deal of time*, *large*, (13) *a large portion of chips* and *small*, (14) *a small piece of cake*. As can be seen in the example, postdeterminers are often preceded by the indefinite article. Furthermore, words such as, ‘lot’ co-occur with countable and uncountable nouns, (15) *a lot of chairs*, and (16) *a lot of bread*, are both possible for example. The function and use of determiners and their often interdependent, relationships with one another is a complex area of linguistic study. This paper focuses on *a*, *the*, *zero* and *null* articles only. These are classified as central determiners as well as articles. In this analysis, they are referred to as articles and discussed through the central issues identified by Quirk et al. (1985) and Huddleston (1984), countability, specificity, definiteness, genericness, identifiability, and anaphora. Before looking at the articles it is useful to briefly clarify the types of nouns that articles are used with.

3. Nouns, Articles, and Countability

Normally common nouns are divided into two types. Uncountable nouns refer to undifferentiated mass or notion, such as *coffee*, *luck*, and *insight*. Countable nouns refer to countable things such as *dogs*, *chairs*, and *computers*. Countable and uncountable nouns are also divided into abstract and concrete nouns. Abstract nouns generally refer to what Crystal (2004) defines as “unobservable notions” (p.20) such as *thought*, *sound*, or *moment*. Concrete nouns are nouns that can be observed and measured such as *bike*, *sugar*, and *telephone*.

A noun’s countability is dependent on its potential to combine with various types of determiners. According to Huddleston (1984), mass (noncount) and

individuated (count) interpretation of a phrase is dependent on the choice of determiner, the noun use (singular or plural) and the noun itself. A typical count noun can occur with *the* in the singular and plural, (17) *the sandwich*, (18) *the sandwiches*, and with no article in the plural, (19) *Sandwiches are delicious*, for example. A typical noncount noun can occur with *the* and no article in the singular: (20) *The sugar is sweet*, and (21) *sugar is sweet*, are both possible for instance. Some nouns are both countable and uncountable depending on how they are used. Grammarians refer to these as dual-class nouns. *Pizza* is a concrete noun and uses definite and indefinite articles in the singular (22) *the pizza*, (23) *a pizza* and (24) *the pizzas* in the plural.

The definite article normally gives an individuated interpretation when used with plurals. Thus, the phrase (25) *the pizzas over there*, refers to a batch of individual pizzas. Both the indefinite and the zero articles are unable to function in this way, (26) *a pizzas over there** and (27) *pizzas over there** are not possible. In addition, *the* is not limited by countability, (28) *the chair*, (29) *the chairs* (countable), and (30) *the furniture* (uncountable) are possible for example. Concrete dual class nouns denote the observable relationship of material substances and objects. However, with abstract dual class nouns, the same phrases are used to denote unobservable notions as in *success* or *failure*. As Huddleston (1984, p.246) points out;

Compare - *He then pointed out another difficulty*, and *He hadn't expected having so much difficulty persuading her*. In the first example, the difficulty is presented as more particularized, more delimited – more bounded – than in the second.

Huddleston (1984) also states noncount nouns “cannot sustain an individuated interpretation” (p.247): For instance, (31) *an information** is not possible as an NP.

Therefore, noun phrases using noncount nouns such as *information*, or *equipment* require partitive nouns like *piece* or *item* that become part of mass NP within the NP. Phrases such as, (32) *a piece of information*, are then possible.

Countable nouns are capable of mass interpretation. The countability of dual class nouns is difficult to measure, and so degrees of countability are open to interpretation depending on the noun and article the noun can accept. Indeed, as Quirk et al. (1985) note, “the distinction between count and uncountable nouns is not fully explainable” (p.245). Article use then has more than a single contrast between countable and noncount nouns. Dual class nouns use different articles for individuated, and mass interpretation and article use is usually dependent on the nouns’ level of countability. Linguists bridge the distinction between countable and uncountable nouns with models of prototypicality. A prototypical noun matches all the criteria associated with its type whether it is countable or uncountable. A dual-class noun is then able to be assessed according to its countability between these two prototypical states.

Testing whether nouns can accept various determiners in the plural and singular is a method of calculating its countability. A noun such as *cheese* has more countability than the noun *milk*. We know this because *cheese* takes the indefinite article *a* making it more countable than *milk*, which does not. This shows that the noun *cheese* has criteria closer to the prototypical count noun than the prototypical noncount noun. This kind of information helps grammarians and English learners assess how and when the use of articles is appropriate with different nouns.

3.1. Article Use and Definiteness

Definiteness is a term used in linguistics to refer to an observable, specific entity. The use of articles is strongly connected to the degree of definiteness of the head noun in an NP. The definite article *the*, the indefinite article *a*, and the

functions of zero and null articles all determine the definiteness of the head noun in a noun phrase. Master (1997) states, “the zero article is the most indefinite of the articles. Its general function is to remove the boundaries that make nouns discrete” (p.222). The indefinite article is usually omitted from a phrase for a zero article to function in this way. Compare (33) *the girls ate a pizza* with (34) *the girls ate pizza*. The difference between the two NPs is the level of definiteness. With indefinite *a* the NP is more definite; we know the girls ate one pizza. However, in the NP with a zero article the amount of pizza consumed is undetermined. Furthermore, a zero article is used with various uncountable nouns and plural count nouns, both concrete and abstract. Also, when a zero article is used before a countable noun, it changes it to an uncountable noun: (35) *the man caught a fish* (countable) becomes (36) *the man caught fish* (uncountable), for example.

In contrast, the null article is the most definite of articles. The definite article is usually omitted from an NP for a null article to function. Compare, (37) *He was crowned The King of Spain* with (38) *He was crowned King of Spain*. As with the NP with the definite article, the NP with the null article leaves no doubt about the definiteness of the NP. Although, in the example the use of a null article presumes the hearer has more familiarity with the subject. Master (1997) suggests the indefinite *a* usually signifies a boundary that makes a noncount noun preceded by a zero article countable: Compare, (39) *coffee would be great* (uncountable) and (40) *a coffee would be great* (countable). In effect then it has the opposite function of a zero article. In comparison with a zero article the indefinite article offers more definiteness in NPs. The example shows the boundary created by the use of *a* further defines the hearers understanding of what kind of coffee to expect. It is more likely to be a cup of coffee rather than a shipment of coffee. According to Master (1997, p.225): “The general function of *the* is to single out or identify, or to indicate that the speaker either presumes a noun to be singled out and identified for the hearer or instructs the hearer to do so.”

The definite article then provides a description of the referent sufficient to distinguish it from all other things. However, as Huddleston (1984) argues:

Prior knowledge or familiarity with the referent on the part of the addressee is not a necessary condition for the appropriate use of *the*; what matters is that the description together with any necessary contextual supplementation should provide (or be regarded as providing) defining information about the referent (p.251).

For example, in the sentence (41) *the man in the shop was very rude*. The hearer need not know or be familiar with the man, or the shop.

3.2. Specific and Generic Reference

Linguists recognize a distinction between specific and generic reference. Specific and non-specific distinctions are determined, in part, by articles. Both definite and indefinite articles are used in specific and non-specific phrases. In the phrase (42) *David bought a book at the weekend*, the indefinite article signifies a particular book was purchased. The phrase (43) *David would like to buy a book at the weekend* is different. Here the indefinite article specifies a book may be purchased. However, the type of book and whether or not it will be purchased is not determined, and so the reference is classified as non-specific.

The definite article is used in a similar way, for example, (44) *David bought the present* and (45) *David is still looking for the right present* both express specific and non-specific reference. However, in specific reference the definite article *the* is used to mark the phrase it introduces as definite. Quirk et al. (1985) clarify this point noting the definite article *the* functions, “as referring to something which can be identified uniquely in the contextual, or general knowledge shared by speaker and hearer” (p.265). While the articles used within the NP are a factor to specificity,

all the properties of the sentence are integral to its distinction. This contrasts with definiteness, where article use determines definite and indefinite distinction in NPs. This contrast is a factor to consider in understanding the generic use of articles. Generic references include phrases such as (46) *a dog bit me*, and (47) *the French make delicious food*. Here dogs are seen as a class of animal and no specific reference is made to a particular breed. In the second example *the French* are seen as a class of people rather than specific individuals. As Quirk et al. (1985) state, “the reference is generic, since we are thinking of the class without specific reference” (p.265). Quirk et al. (1985) also note further considerations between specific and generic references. They suggest definiteness and plurality are less crucial for generic reference because they denote the class or species generally. For example (48) *a dog is a good pet*; (49) *dogs are good pets*, and (50) *the dogs are good pets* are all possible, “without appreciable difference of meaning” (p.265).

3.3. Anaphoric Reference

Anaphoric reference uses the definite article *the* to refer to information identified earlier in the communication. In the sentence (51) *we had steak and chips and the steak was delicious*, the definite article *the* used with *steak* is an anaphoric reference. It refers to something mentioned earlier in the text. Quirk et al. (1985) refer to this as a “direct anaphoric” (p.267) reference because the same noun is used in the reference. We can contrast this with indirect anaphoric reference, which relies more on receivers of the communication having enough indirect knowledge to decode the meaning. The sentence (52) *we visited the museum and the artifacts were fascinating*, assumes the listener understands a museum usually contains artifacts. Anaphoric potential is greatly increased after the topic is introduced. The sentence above introduces the museum and anaphorically refers to artifacts. It is also now possible to refer anaphorically to (53) *the paintings*, (54) *the cafeteria*, (55) *the toilets*, (56) *the staff*, and an almost infinite amount of information about

the museum.

The use of the article system in English has been shown to be a complex subject full of rules and exceptions to those rules. The focus of this study now shifts to some of the problems Japanese learners of English have with article acquisition and use.

4. English Articles and Japanese Learners of English

The salient grammatical issues in article use by Japanese learners of English involve first language interference and the complex choices the user is required to make to use English articles correctly. Japanese learners of English have many problems using articles appropriately. In an analytical study of grammatical errors in 632 English compositions written by Japanese students in American high schools, Kimizuka (1967) found article use had a higher percentage of mistakes than any other grammatical category. Kimizuka explains his findings;

Japanese has no part of speech equivalent of English articles...That article usage constitutes one of the greatest problems for the Japanese learner is vividly revealed in the high frequency of mistakes, the highest of all the structural items. The Japanese student must not only learn the numerous rules for the usage with as many exceptions, but he must also practice them by drill. It is comparatively simple to learn the rules, but it is not equally simple to apply the rules to actual situations (p.78-79).

Moreover, Japanese does not distinguish between singular and plural noun forms. Instead, it attaches the plural markers *tachi* (達) to personal pronouns and *ra* (ら) to proper nouns. Japanese also uses different markers *ka-zo-e-ka-ta* called *josūshi* (助数詞) for counting various objects, things, animals and so on. How then do these grammatical differences in Japanese effect the acquisition of article use in

English?

Master (1997) compares article use among learners of English from different countries. The study contrasts learners whose native language uses articles with learners of English whose native language does not. The analysis covers four general levels of interlanguage. In his interpretation of the results, Master raises awareness of issues in article acquisition and use relevant to Japanese learners. He suggests that low-level Japanese learners could appear to understand the zero article when in all likelihood they are simply not using it. Accuracy with the use of the zero article declines as student ability improves, and between interlanguage levels before near perfect accuracy is attained at the highest ability range. Master also points out that overuse of the zero article decreases with increasing interlanguage level, and that its overuse at the highest level is greater than the other articles. He also suggests Japanese learners require one interlanguage level to realize that an article system exists.

Master's (1997) study suggests that when Japanese learners realize the zero article is not always appropriate, they seem to think that all nouns require *the*. Furthermore, *the* and *a* appear to be acquired independently of one another with *the* usually being understood first. As learners become more competent and begin to understand countability, *a* is acquired and its accuracy of use increases accordingly. Master (1997) points out that *a* does not suffer the same overuse as *the*, or the *zero article*, arguing that learners will not use it "until they are certain it is correct" (p.218). Masters' study shows that once articles are established as a necessity, the main difficulties in use surround countability and definiteness. How these are determined through context by native speakers is both difficult for teachers to convey and for learners to understand. As Yoon (1993) argues:

How do native English speakers perceive beauty in sentences like "My sister had _ great beauty in her youth", and "My sister was _ beauty in her youth,"

How do they use the context to determine the indefinite vs. zero article in these sentences? (pp.283-284).

This is perhaps a question that strays out of grammatical analysis into conceptual based approaches (*see* Hinenoya & Lyster, 2015), and the field of psycholinguistics. However, it does raise pedagogical issues about when and how to teach articles. Due to L1 interference Japanese learners still seem to have difficulties with zero and definite article use even at higher interlanguage levels. Master (1997) advocates teaching articles from elementary level upwards, although he advises a lexical approach; reckoning fluency with the article system is possible when dependence on syntactic rules is reduced within each learning level. It would not be appropriate to teach the generic uses of articles with elementary learners for example.

5. Conclusion

A synopsis of a complex aspect of English grammar has been presented. Article use has been shown to be not fully explicable. In combination with first language interference, the analysis suggests that article use can move beyond grammatical explanation into the realm of psycho/cultural linguistics. It also shows how first language grammatical conventions can impede the understanding and learning of English as a second language. Countability and definiteness are identified as specific problems for Japanese English learners.

In the Japanese EFL classroom the issues and difficulties in article use should be highlighted. Pedagogic guidelines for teachers should specify, in detail, what part of the article system to teach and at what interlanguage level. In addition, while many teachers know that Japanese learners have problems with article use, students' conscious awareness of article use, and common mistakes could be increased. A practical way of doing this would be to highlight the issues in grammar sections of

student and teacher course books. How this would be accomplished is another topic. However, if this were to be done, it would ensure that problems with article use would be taught at the appropriate interlanguage level, within the context of the course. Moreover, students would have the necessary grammatical ability to concentrate on the article use, rather than other lexical requirements in the communication.

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