

ARTICLES - THEIR MEANINGS, STRUCTURES AND USES

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Since the first day that I entered a classroom to teach Thai students, I have been confronted with the problem of structural differences between the Thai and English languages and the students' endeavours to overcome these basic differences by applying every and any means within their reach. The result, of course, is what the TESL teachers usually refer to as L1 interference (Mother tongue interference).

Among these L1 problems, which include the lack of grammatical necessities such as gender, tense, plurality and so on, the problem of articles and its importance in the English Language forced me to teach students under my care the intricacies of articles with more than ordinary gusto. The more time I spent in this quagmire, the more determined I became to overcome it.

Finally, in my studies at Chulalongkorn University, my teachers took pains to explain to me the one subject that almost became my nemesis--

Grammar. While doing research for my term paper on one of the Grammar subjects, I came across Articles, a subject which I had vowed to explain fully to my students in Assumption University.

This paper attempts to solve the mysteries of English Articles for Thai students whose language does not contain articles as is known generally.

Articles have been defined differently by various schools of grammar. Structures and uses of these same articles have also been varied and is different from one another.

Definitions of Articles

Articles have been defined by the "Structural Grammarians" in terms of position. They are termed "noun determiners" and include the following:

"the, a/an, this/these, that/those, my/our, your, their, his, her, its, one, many a, more, several, no, all, both."

For these structural grammarians, articles are placed in the "function word" group on the basis of their positions in a sentence. "The" and "a" are typical markers of nouns: they are often called determiners because they are members of a small class of words which help to 'determine' or mark off the status of other words. (William Branford)⁽¹⁾

Transformational Grammarians, however, treat articles differently. Jacobs and Rosenbaum state that: "Articles appear in deep structure as a feature of nouns. They may be realized in the surface structure as *the* when the noun has the feature *definite*, *a* when it is indefinite, and *this*, *that*, *these*, *those* when it is demonstrative."⁽²⁾

For Traditional Grammarians, articles consist of *two* members of this special class; namely *a/an* and *the*, which are called *Indefinite* and *Definite* articles respectively.

A or *an* is called the Indefinite Article because it leaves indefinite the person or thing spoken of.

The is called the Definite Article because it points out some particular person or thing.

Traditional grammarians have pointed out that "a" and "an" are weakened forms of "one" and "the" a weakened form of "that". Unlike other grammarians, they have provided rules for the use of articles.

Traditional grammar regards only "the" and "a" as articles; transformational grammar includes *this*, *that*,

these, *those* and a few others in the class of articles; structural grammar groups several words that can occur before a noun in the same class as "a", "an", and "the".

Although these grammars do not agree as to what words are included in the class of articles, they however agree that

- 1) what is called 'article' or 'determiner' occurs before a noun or before any word that functions as a noun;
- 2) the function of the article is to show whether the noun is definite or indefinite.

Modern grammarians have pointed out the inadequacies of the traditional grammar as well as the structural in their treatment of articles. H.A. Gleason Jr. commented that: "they are all alike in stopping short of an adequate classification. What is given in most is not even adequate for the rather gross abbreviated treatment that can be given in a brief grammar curriculum."⁽³⁾

Gleason in his *Linguistics and English Grammar*, attempts to subdivide the group of determiners:

1. Determiners that can occur in sequences, but only as the first member. -all, both;
2. determiners that can occur as the first or second of two or as the second of three-the, this, that;
3. determiners that can occur only as the last in the sequences of two or three-several, many;
4. determiners that do not ordinarily occur with other determiners except occasionally with numerals-every, each, any;

5. the numerals-two-twenty;
6. the "indefinite article" which most often occurs as the only determiner in a phrase, but may occur in certain very special combinations : many a....⁽⁴⁾

On the other hand, John A. Hawkins in his *Definiteness and Indefiniteness* criticized grammarians for missing the higher level generalisations:

"The student of definiteness and indefiniteness is therefore confronted at the outset by three sets of, apparently quite independent, linguistic generalisations : generalisations of meaning having to do with truth and falsity conditions; pragmatic generalisations of meaning involving appropriate usage; and syntactic generalisations involving the grammaticality of one or other (but never both) in various syntactic frames. Almost inevitably, higher level generalisations have been missed."⁽⁵⁾

Whatever the inadequacies, the present state of the study of articles is still reasonably adequate to enable the student of definiteness and indefiniteness to investigate the usages of both, classes of articles namely *the*, *this*, *that*, *these*, *those*, the "definite articles" and *a* and its variant *an*, the "indefinite articles".

THE DEFINITE ARTICLES

1. The definite article 'the', its function and uses.

In Traditional grammar, the definite article can be used before singular or plural nouns whether countable or

uncountable.

A. The definite article *the* is generally used as demonstrative.

In this case, *the* has a two-fold function :

- (1) It can point backwards to a person or thing already mentioned and it is called anaphoric *the* in traditional grammar.

Example: John bought a hat and coat, but he returned *the* hat.

- (2) It can point to a definite person or thing described usually by a following genitive, adverb, prepositional phrase, or relative clause. This kind of *the* is called determinative *the* in traditional grammar.

Example: *the* book in the corner.

However, when it is clear from the context what the person or thing in question refers to, the modifier of the noun after *the* is not necessary.

Example: *the* book.

When the referent of the noun is unique of its kind, *the* is used without a modifier. *Example:* *the* South, *the* North.

It is also used instead of a possessive adjective in propositional phrases referring to body parts.

Example: He went red in *the* face.

- B. Sometimes the definite article *the* does not indicate definiteness. It sometimes has a generalizing force.

Examples: *The* elephant likes peanuts and is larger than the buffalo.

The whale is a mammal.

In the above examples, the noun phrase does not refer to a particular

animal but to the whole class. *The* in sentences of this type is called the generic *the*. When the generic *the* is used with an adjective, the adjective will function as a noun representing the whole class.

Examples: *The poor* (all poor people) are more generous than *the rich*.

The brave deserve *the fair*.

C. Special use of *the*.

Usually the definite article *the* is used to precede common nouns. However, it is sometimes used with proper nouns. It also occurs with an adjective or adverb in the comparative or superlative degree.

(1) *the* + Proper Noun

a. *The* before a proper noun referring to a well known or famous person often gives it the force of a common noun.

Example: He is *the* Shakespeare of Thailand.

b. *The* before a proper noun which is the name of a family indicate the members of that family.

Example: *The Jones, the Smiths*.

(2) *the* + adjective or adverb in the comparative or superlative degree.

According to structural grammar and transformational grammar, *the* is a constituent of a noun phrase. Some grammarians however, deal with *the* that occurs with an adjective or adverb in the comparative or superlative degree in the same section as the determinative *the*. It may be that *the* in this type of construction and the article *the* are homonyms.

Examples: *The bigger* they are,

the harder they fall.

The more, the merrier.

Besides adjectives in the comparative degree, *the* can precede adjectives in the superlative degree too.

Examples: I like Michael Jackson, but it is Stevie Wonder that I like *the* most.
Is that *the* best you can do?

The Definite Article has been noted by many theoreticians of other disciplines, the most prominent among those are John Stuart Mill who was quoted as stating that such individuality of an otherwise general name may be indicated by the syntactic form of the expression—an initially placed *the* or some other definite determiner. According to him a general name can be converted into an individual name by using it with the definite article on an occasion or in a context that makes clear which individual is to be understood; eg. *the king* when spoken or written under such circumstances.

Gottlob Frege however, considers the definite article as a marker for a proper name. He says that a noun which is preceded by the definite article or a demonstrative adjectives is a proper name. When a noun is used with the indefinite article or in the plural without an article, it is a concept word.

Bertrand Russell, the noted philosopher, in the *Principles of Mathematics*, stresses the importance of the words *all, every, any, a, some, and the*. In his system, a concept-word has no semantical relation to whatever things fall under the concept; only *the* plus a noun designates an object and

does not designate a concept. For him each of the six words with a noun, forms what he calls a 'denoting phrase.' He states that the word *the*, in the singular, is correctly employed only in relation to a class-concept of which there is only one instance. Thus the definite article, unlike *a* and the quantifiers, provides a method of denoting one single term by means of a concept.

For Wallace L. Chafe, the totality of a substance or class vs an instance of the substance or member of the class, and (2) the question in the latter case of whether the hearer knows which instance or which member is referred to, are the two basic factors that interact to occasion noun inflection. Of these inflections, he dwells at length on 'definiteness' and 'non-definiteness', and concludes with the statement :

"The meaning of definite is that the speaker assumes that the hearer knows the identity of a particular member of the class or a particular instance of the substance."⁽⁶⁾

He goes on to state that a noun, provided it is not *definite*, must be inflected as generic in the environment of a generic verb. Thus *generic* and *definite* are incompatible, except in special circumstances. For him, definiteness is possible in count and plural nouns also. The semantic units *definite* and *aggregate* fall together postsemantically to become the *definite article*. The surface item known as the *indefinite article* actually can be regarded as a reflection of the selectional unit *count* : that is, it appears in the surface structure whenever there is semantically a count noun which is neither definite, definite nor plural-

precisely in those situations where there is no other surface article or suffix.

Chafe has introduced a semantic unit *bounded* which can apply to nouns which constitute a bounded set. These type of nouns are "Indian", "hippies", "computers" etc. If they had been already inflected as definite and plural, they may be further inflected as generic (provided the verb is generic). Thus definite and generic may be compatible in such cases. Definiteness is also apparent in uniqueness as the hearer knows automatically which member is being talked about since that member is unique. Thus a unique noun is definite. With regard to surface representations, it can be noted that some unique noun roots allow *definite* to be represented in the usual way as the definite article, while others cause it to be postsemantically deleted. Thus we find *the sun*, and *the Attorney General*, but simply *Bob and Roger*.

Chafe, thus, has summed up the meaning of definiteness.

The definite Articles

'This, That, These, Those'

The four definite articles can be divided into two groups :

1. on the basis of number : singular and plural and
2. on the basis of distance : nearness and remoteness.

A. Singular and Plural

Demonstratives can be distinguished on the basis of number. Thus, *this* and *that* are singular demonstratives and *these* and *those* are plural demonstratives. This, that, these, and

those usually agree in form with the following noun. The agreement in form is applied even to collective nouns which are singular in form but plural in meaning : *This* throng of people. *That* herd of sheep.

The words like family, nation, government, audience, committee, class etc. are singular in form and are used with the singular demonstrative *this* and *that*.

B. Nearness and Remoteness

On the basis of distance, *this* and *these* form one group as they point out the things which are nearer to the speaker in space and time : *This* boy is stronger. *These* girls sing sweetly.

She will go abroad *this* year.

That and *those* form another group for they refer to the things which are farther away or at a distance from the speaker : *That* boy is industrious. *Those* boys are playing in the field.

THE INDEFINITE ARTICLE

It is generally known that the indefinite article *a* and its variant *an* is placed before a noun to give it a sense of indefiniteness. Structural grammarians place *a* in the same category as *the*, that is, in the function word group because it precedes Class 1 words.

a + noun singular (eg. a boy)

They stipulate that the indefinite article can only be used with a singular countable (central) noun as head. It indicates that the nonoun is being used of one or some(one), or a particular instance of a referent of that noun.

A pound isn't enough. A child could do it.

They were talking to *a* man I

knew well.

Transformational grammarians Jacob and Rosenbaum treat *a* and *an* as two different articles.⁽⁷⁾ The plural form of the indefinite article *a* is 0 which is called a "nondefinite article" by Paul Roberts. This means that a noun phrase that appears to consist of one plural noun is made up of 0 and a noun in the plural form.

Traditional grammarians deal with the indefinite article in detail. Some say that the indefinite article *a* or *an* is derived from the numeral "one", while some state that *a* denotes one member of a class or species concerned but it does not specify which member.

Thomson and Martinet in their *A Practical English Grammar* enumerated the rules of usage of the indefinite articles.

A. Rules for the use of (a) and (an).

- a* I. Before words beginning with consonant or a vowel with a consonant sound

Examples a man, a hat, a European, a University, a one way street

- an* II. Before words beginning with a vowel (a, e, i, o, u) or words beginning with a mute "h".

Examples an apple, an hour, an island

B. Use of a/an

1. Before a singular noun which is countable.

Examples : a flat, a car etc.

2. Before a singular countable noun which is used as an example of a class of things.

Example : A child needs love.

= Any child needs love.

3. With a noun complement. This includes names of professions.

Examples : He is an actor.
It was an earthquake.

4. In certain expressions of quantity.

Examples : A lot of.... A couple, a great many etc.

5. With certain numbers.

Examples : A hundred...., A thousand....
Before half, when half follows a full number : One and a half kilos. A third, a quarter is possible but one-third etc. is also possible.

6. In expressions of price, speed, ratio etc. : 5p a kilo, four times a day (Here a/an = per)

7. In exclamations before singular countable nouns : Such a long queue! What a pretty girl!

8. Can be placed before Mr./Mrs./Miss : A Mr. Smith, A Miss Jones."⁽⁸⁾

Thus the following can be summarised from the form and usage of *a/an* in Traditional Grammar :

Form : The choice between *a* and *an* is phonetically determined.

Usage :

1. *a* used in the sense of 'one'.
2. *a* used in generic sense.
3. *a* used as a noun complement.
4. *a* used as specifying article.
5. *a* used as non specifying article.
6. *a* used in special cases.

In teaching Thai students the articles of the English language, certain difficulties have been discovered.

The basic weakness seems to be that there are no exact equivalents in Thai grammar for the Thai students to grasp the concept. It was found that there are no Thai equivalents to *this/that/these/those* but only a set of words that correspond to them. Similarly the indefinite article *a/an* has a correspondence with a variant form of a cardinal numeral. The definite article *the* has no exact corresponding form in Thai. Mother tongue omission would be the greatest hindrance in adapting the articles and their various usages. A form of familiarisation as introduced by Dr. James Cook in his recent lecture at the Chulalongkorn Language Institute would bear investigation and a series of experiments have been instituted along the lines proposed. It is too early to assess the outcome of these innovations, but it should be a start to diminish the gap between total ignorance and correct usage of these articles. If even a small percentage of the students taught begin to appreciate the concepts and the importance of these articles, the teachers' burden would be that much lessened and they would realise with contentment that they had not strived for these ends in vain.

NOTES

1. William Branford, *The Elements of English* (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), P. 106.
2. Roderick A. Jacobs and Peter S. Rosenbaum, *English Transformational Grammar* (Massachusetts : Blaisdell Publishing Company, 1968), P. 63.

3. H.A. Gleason Jr., *Linguistics and English Grammar* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc., 1965), p. 126.
4. Ibid., pp. 126-128.
5. John A. Hawkins, *Definiteness and Indefiniteness* (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1978), pp. 14-15.
6. Wallace L. Chafe, *Meaning and the Structure of Language* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 188.
7. Jacobs and Rosenbaum, op.cit, p. 85.
8. A.J. Thomson and A.V. Martinet, *A Practical English Grammar*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 15-16.

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