CHAPTER 13

The article system

Articles

The articles *a* and *the*, although used extensively in English, do not have close equivalents in certain other languages. Thus, they present an area of difficulty for some students. Even students with extensive exposure to English often have only a limited functional command over their use.

The three article patterns: the forms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>indefinite to the listener</th>
<th>definite to the listener</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>singular</td>
<td><em>a</em> horse</td>
<td>horse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>uncountable</td>
<td>Ø rice</td>
<td>the rice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plural</td>
<td>Ø horses</td>
<td>horses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The null sign Ø indicates that the word *horses* is not preceded by something that would make it definite such as a number, an article, or a definite pronoun. In this sense, plural nouns are indefinite by default; that is, there is nothing to mark them as definite.

(1) Indefinite singular nouns are marked with *a* (or, *an*); (2) indefinite uncountable nouns and indefinite plurals nouns are marked with Ø. (3) Definite nouns are marked with *the*, regardless of whether they are singular, uncountable, or countable.¹
EXERCISE 11.1: RECOGNIZING THE PATTERNS.

In this exercise, label the numbered noun phrases as singular or plural and as indefinite or definite. The first one is done for you.

1. __indefinite__ , __singular__ 6. ________ , ____________
2. ________ , ____________ 7. ________ , ____________
3. ________ , ____________ 8. ________ , ____________
4. ________ , ____________ 9. ________ , ____________
5. ________ , ____________ 10. ________ , ____________

Napoleon approved of this poem and caused it to be inscribed on the wall of the big barn, at the opposite end from the Seven Commandments. It was surmounted by (1) a portrait of Napoleon, in profile, executed by Squealer in white paint.

Meanwhile, through the agency of Whymper, Napoleon was engaged in (2) complicated negotiations with Frederick and Pilkington. (3) The pile of timber was still unsold. Of the two, Frederick was still the more anxious to get hold of it, but he would not offer (4) a reasonable price. At the same time there were (5) renewed rumours that Frederick and his men were plotting to attack Animal Farm and to destroy the windmill, the building of which had aroused furious jealousy in him. Snowball was known to be still skulking on Pinchfield Farm. In the middle of the summer (6) the animals were alarmed to hear that three hens had come forward and confessed that, inspired by Snowball, they had entered into (7) a plot to murder Napoleon. They were executed immediately, and (8) fresh precautions for Napoleon's safety were taken. (9) Four dogs guarded his bed at night, one at each corner, and a young pig named Pinkeye was given (10) the task of tasting all his food before he ate it, lest it should be poisoned.

1. Countable and uncountable nouns are discussed in Chapter 13.
EXERCISE 11.2: RECOGNIZING THE PATTERNS.

In this exercise, label the numbered noun phrases as singular or plural and as indefinite or definite.

1. ________ , ____________  
2. ________ , ____________  
3. ________ , ____________  
4. ________ , ____________  
5. ________ , ____________  
6. ________ , ____________  
7. ________ , ____________  
8. ________ , ____________  
9. ________ , ____________  
10. ________ , ____________

At about the same time it was given out that Napoleon had arranged to sell (1) the pile of timber to Mr. Pilkington; he was also going to enter into (2) a regular agreement for the exchange of (3) certain products between Animal Farm and Foxwood. (4) The relations between Napoleon and Pilkington, though they were only conducted through Whymper, were now almost friendly. (5) The animals distrusted Pilkington, as a human being, but greatly preferred him to Frederick, whom they both feared and hated. As the summer wore on, and the windmill neared completion, (6) the rumours of an impending treacherous attack grew stronger and stronger. Frederick, it was said, intended to bring against them twenty men all armed with guns, and he had already bribed the magistrates and police, so that if he could once get hold of the title deeds of Animal Farm they would ask no questions. Moreover, (7) terrible stories were leaking out from Pinchfield about the cruelties that Frederick practised upon his animals. He had flogged (8) an old horse to death, he starved his cows, he amused himself in the evenings by making cocks fight with splinters of razor-blade tied to their spurs. The animals' blood boiled with rage when they heard of these things being done to their comrades, and sometimes they clamoured to be allowed to go out in a body and attack Pinchfield Farm, drive out (9) the humans, and set the animals free. But Squealer counselled them to avoid (10) rash actions and trust in Comrade Napoleon's strategy.

The meaning of the articles

The general notion behind article usage is fairly straightforward: the indefinite pattern is used when the speaker (or, writer) does not expect the listener (or, reader) to be able to identify the noun and the definite pattern is used when the speaker (or, writer) expects the listener (or, reader) to be able to identify the noun.

In practice, there are almost a countless number of situations that might make a noun phrase ‘identifiable to the listener’. Among these are the following:

a. Sometimes a noun is definite to the listener because it is in some way unique. For instance, the use of superlative adjectives such as biggest, strongest, fastest, and so on, usually implies that we are talking about a unique entity. That is, normally there is only assumed to be only one biggest..., only one strongest..., and only one fastest...; thus, superlatives usually occur with the, e.g., the biggest fish, the strongest athelete, the fastest runner.

b. At other times the use of ordinal adjectives such as the first..., the last..., the eleventh..., makes it possible for the listener to identify the noun phrase. Quite similar are adjectives such as the sole..., the only..., and the beginning....

c. Previous mention may be what makes the referent identifiable to the listener. Consider the example.

I bought a new car just last night, and the stupid car has already broken down. The first time the car is mentioned it is not identifiable to the listener, hence, a car. But, once it has been mentioned, the listener can identify it, hence, the car.

d. Information provided by the general context may be what makes the noun identifiable to the listener. For example, if there was only one car in the parking lot, I could turn to you and ask, “Is the car yours?” Why the? Since there is only one in the vicinity, I can safely assume that you will be able to identify the one I am referring to.

e. The information provided in the noun phrase or clause may by itself be sufficient to make the noun identifiable for the listener.
In each of these noun phrases, it is the underlined part that makes the preceding noun identifiable to the listener.

f. And, finally, the very fact that the speaker has used the might make it possible for the listener to identify the referent.

All these, however, are simply instances of the more general rule: a noun phrase is marked as definite by the because the speaker assumes that the listener can, for whatever reason, identify the referent. The corollary, likewise, is that a noun phrase is marked as indefinite by a or Ø because the speaker assumes the listener cannot, for whatever reason, identify the referent.

Other notes:

Not with uncountables: Although the previous paragraph describes the essence of the usage, other nuances also enter into the use of these articles. For instance, a/an cannot co-occur with uncountables (for a discussion of uncountables, see Chapter 12).

A versus an: The difference between a and an, which has been left aside here because of its lesser importance, depends upon whether the vowel immediately following a or an begins with a consonant sound or with a vowel sound. If it begins with a consonant sound,
Chapter 10: Referential or generic?

*a* is used; if it begins with a vowel sound, *an* is used. Notice that this rule depends upon sounds, not letters, for example, *a cat, a dog,* and *a uniform* all begin with consonant sounds, while *an orange, an experiment,* and *an honor* begin with vowel sounds.

**Others:** Other nuances also occur, but they have been ignored here because they do not seem to rest at the crux of the problems my students have with the use of *a* and *the.*

**Referential or generic?**

Depending upon how they used, nouns may be either referential or generic. That is, sometimes nouns are being used to refer to entities that have a reference in the real world—to *instances* or *tokens.* Thus, the noun *cat* in *The cat in the living room is actually the neighbors’* refers to an actual cat existing in the real world. Presumably, you could find out its name, pick it up, feed it, or whatever.

The referential use of *cat* contrasts with the generic use of the noun *cats* in *Cats make interesting pets.* Here the noun *cats* is not being used to refer to specific cats but instead *cats* is being used to refer to the class of cats as a whole—to ‘classes’ or *types.* Notice that in this use it hardly makes sense to talk about naming or feeding these cats—they are abstract entities. This type of reference is not to an instance or token of something but to a type or kind is sometimes termed *generic.*

The article system is used to refer both to referential and to generic entities. In the examples, the first two italicized noun phrases are referential and the next three are generic.

*A student in English 222* dropped my class last week.

*The woman next to the door* is looking for Jack.

If you put your finger in *a wall socket,* you get *an electrical shock.*

*The horse* was domesticated centuries and centuries ago.

The importance of this distinction comes in the teaching of articles. The meanings of the articles when used with referential noun phrases are reasonably easy to comprehend; some noun phrases are indefinite from the viewpoint of the listener or reader, and some noun
phrases are indefinite. Remember the exercise above using the rods in which the student is instructions such as *Pick up the blue rod* and *Pick up a red rod*.

The meanings of the articles change when used with generics. With generics, the reference is being made either to the class as a whole, for example, *the horse* in *The horse is a four-legged animal* or to any member of the class as an exemplar of the class as a whole, for example, *a dog* in *A dog would make him a wonderful pet*.

At this point, it should be obvious that when introducing the use of articles, it is easier to not only begin with referential nouns but also to attain some skill in article use before moving on to materials that also include generic nouns.¹

**Generic subjects.** The choice between the generic subjects *Lions…, A lion…, and The lion…* is not based on grammar. The question, however, is what is it based on? Certainly, in part, it is a question of style (whatever that is).

- *Lions* are dangerous animals. the ‘usual’ form
- *A lion* is a dangerous animal. definitions/characterizations
- *The lion* is a dangerous animal. a stylistic variant

The ‘usual’ generic subject is *Lions…*; this form typically functions to mark generic subjects. When in doubt students should use this choice.

The other two choices are restricted to use under much more limited contexts. *A lion…* is typically restricted to definitions and characterizations of generic classes.

- *A lion* is a member of the cat family.
- *A lion* is capable of considerable speed and endurance.

*The lion…*, unlike the other two choices, does not have its own unique function. Instead it is a stylistic variant of the other two, not particularly widely used and certainly restricted to cases where it can only be understood generically.

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¹ The discussion of these three types of generic subjects is tentative, preliminary, and in need of more research.
Generic subject complements. The choice of generics (the term generic is discussed below) found in the subject complement slots of these examples is grammatically not semantically determined.

Those men are teachers.
That man is a teacher.

In these examples, the choice of subject complements is determined by the number of the coreferential subject.

Teaching the difference: an example

By highlighting the distinct meanings of *a* and *the*, the exercises below help the students learn when to use the and when to use *a/an*. The exercise works because if the students don't understand the distinction between *a* and *the*, it is not really possible to follow the directions correctly.

The distinction between *the* (the so-called definite article) and *a* (the so-called indefinite article) can be illustrated vividly by the following demonstration:

Prepare for the demonstration by placing a number of rods in plain view of the students, making sure that for some of the colors, only one rod is present, while for others more than one is present. For example, using three red rods, four green rods, two orange rods, and a yellow rod, direct a volunteer in the following way:
Teacher:  "Pick up a red rod."  [There are three red rods]
Student:  [does it]
Teacher:  "Pick up the green rod."

Because there are four green rods in view, and because the use of *the* asks the student to pick up a specific green rod, the student who has internalized the distinction between *a* and *the* is in a dilemma because it is not clear which one to pick up. Once students realize that they need more information to carry out the order, they may respond by asking "Which one?" Sometimes, however, it is necessary to cue them. The students with no understanding of the distinction at all will pick up rods totally without regard to the use of *a* and *the*.

Student:  "Which one?"
Teacher:  [pointing]  "That one."
Student:  [does it]
Teacher:  "Pick up the yellow one."  [There is only one yellow rod]
Alternate (or continuation):

Teacher: "Pick up the orange rod." [There are two]  
Student: "Which one?"
Teacher: [points] "That one."
Student: [does it]  
Teacher: "Pick up a green rod and give it to the student."
Student: "Which student?" (or "Which one?")

This final version, with its distinction between *a student* and *the student*, sometimes works even better, because the difference between *a student* and *the student* is more important to them than the earlier difference between *a rod* and *the rod*.

The grammar implicit in the demonstration is fairly straightforward. Traditionally, *the* and *a* are termed definite and indefinite, respectively. This characterization of *a* and *the*, although accurate as far as it goes, omits something that turns out to be crucial—*the* and *a* are used to describe something as identifiable (definite) or not identifiable (indefinite) not from the speaker/writer's viewpoint but from the listener/reader's viewpoint. It is the mention of this crucial 'other' orientation that is most often missing from the traditional 'definite versus indefinite' description. For instance, if I say to you, "I met an extremely famous film star last night," the *an* is being used from your viewpoint, not mine. Obviously, I know which star I met; it is from your viewpoint, not mine that it is indefinite. If I should continue talking about the movie star it would be 'the movie star,' because you can now identify the referent on the basis of my previous reference.

The articles are difficult to hear because they are not only often phonologically unstressed but also reduced. An easy-to-make listening exercise can help this. Simply record a short passage on a tape recorder, type the passage out omitting eight or ten of the articles, and then distribute a copy of the article-less passage to the students. Their task is to fill in the missing articles. It may even be helpful to tell them how many are missing. Incidentally, other than saving your voice, an advantage of the tape recorder is that you cannot be accused of saying it differently each time it is read. Expect to have to do at least four or five repetitions of a passage before all the students can hear the articles, even when to your ear the articles are clearly audible.
**Exercises 11.3:**

Sample test question:

Explain the meaning of *a* and *the* using this passage:

Last night I bought *a* used car. *The* car was a '67 Chevy, but *the* engine was new. *The* upholstery was also new.

Note: A typical incorrect answer includes the comment that in the first sentence *a* refers to any car. This is not wrong, but it is certainly inadequate. Why?

Postscripts:

Note:

This chapter makes no pretence of having discussed all the intricacies of the English article system, much less the English determiner system. However, although countless ‘exceptions’ and qualifications remain undiscussed, the discussion should provide the basics for those of you who teach.

**Terms**

To check yourself, see if you can briefly describe each of the following terms and illustrate it in a phrase or sentence (underlining the relevant part).

**Articles**

*a, the, Ø*

definite or indefinite

the three article patterns
Chapter 10: Terms

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<tr>
<td>uncountable</td>
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<td>the rice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plural</td>
<td>Ø horses</td>
<td>horses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

demonstrative pronouns: that, those

ordinal numbers: first, second

articles: a/an, the

quantifiers: all, some, a few, many

both of…

all of…

Answers to Exercise 11.1:

1. indefinite, singular  
2. indefinite, plural  
3. definite, singular  
4. indefinite, singular  
5. indefinite, plural  
6. definite, plural  
7. indefinite, singular  
8. indefinite, plural  
9. indefinite, plural  
10. definite, singular

Answer to Exercise 11.2:

1. definite, singular  
6. definite, plural
2. indefinite, singular
3. indefinite, plural
4. definite, plural
5. definite, plural
7. indefinite, plural
8. indefinite, singular
9. definite, plural
10. indefinite, plural

Answer to Exercise 11.3:

A used car refers to a used car that is not identifiable from the listener’s viewpoint (but clearly, in this case, is identifiable from the speaker’s). The is now used for the car since the listener can now identify it, as well as for the engine and the upholstery, which the listener can now also identify.

The comment that in the first sentence a refers to any car is inadequate since it fails to specify whose viewpoint is being used and the car is only any car from the listener’s viewpoint.