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Articles - *a few Swings at the Piñata*

William R. Nelson

Introduction

The greater majority of old grammars for native speakers all but ignored the articles (*a[n]*, *the*); however, with the growing acceptance of English as an international language, more and more grammars are giving full treatment to them. The problem still exists, however, as to how well the explanations in these grammars can be understood by non-linguists, and whether or not non-native speakers can internalize the guidelines. This present paper, reviewing some of the treatments given in grammars from 1931 to the early sixties, will focus on what's missing in their explanations and how well non-linguists, especially non-native speakers of English, can utilize the information supplied. The tone throughout the paper will be rather critical, irreverent, sometimes jocular, but this, in no way, is meant to belittle the great efforts of the authors and works cited. Even though each of them has added immeasurably to the growing, increasingly accurate description of the English language that we now have, we can still have some fun doing the serious work of linguistics. A flowchart-type questionnaire is proffered at the end of this paper to help non-native speakers of English determine when to use the articles, and to attract some critical, irreverent, and/or jocular comments.

Contributions from *the past*

Descriptive English Grammar, 1931

In their Preface to the 1931 edition of *Descriptive English Grammar*, the

authors, House and Harman sound a battle cry:

Good grammar is coming back (*Don't forget, this is 1931 they are talking about!*) into the schools of America through the colleges. (*Makes you wonder just what was going on in the high schools.*) It is in these that the necessity of a broad acquaintance with English fundamentals is now most keenly felt. (*Note the vitriolic that follows!*) Teachers of rhetoric who despair of getting well-phrased and intelligently punctuated writing from students ignorant of case and mode and the shape of sentences, the teachers of literature who want their hearers to share their own sense of the dignity and beauty of grammatical form (*Just what you were thinking, right?*), are beginning to insist that the fine science of speech be reknown by the many as it is still known by the few. (*Guess who's included in the few!*) (*Now, get this!*) They are declaring that English shall not without protest be murdered (*Not just sullied or defiled, but actually murdered!*) in the house of its relatives; that, in the college classrooms at least, classic grace of diction shall not utterly (*Is there a pun intended?*) give place to the braggart jargon of the advertiser and the vaudeville stage. (*Well, Vaudeville is gone, but . . .*) The authors of this book offer it to English teachers in the hope that it may prove an effective instrument in helping drive home the classic wedge. (*This, no doubt, is how Dracula was killed!*)

How horribly defiled our English language would have become had not House, Harman, and many that came before and after tried so hard to save it. Save it from itself; save it for us, progeny. In their section on articles in the 1931 edition of *Descriptive English Grammar*, House and Harman explain that both the articles are definitive; however, that one of them is more definitive than the other, therefore the has come to be known as the definite article, and *a[n]* as the indefinite article. To

further their argument, they point out that *The man on the corner* nearly equals *That man on the corner*, but the mere mention of this information does not help the learner distinguish when to use *the* and when to use *that*, let alone when to use *a*. Their second and last mention concerning the usage of *the* is the generic *a* manifest in literary expressions. Rather than aiding learners, the authors are rather more enamored of *the*'s roots in Old English, and a misconception about an Old English character that gave rise to *ye* in archaic expressions. While, this is indeed interesting, again, it doesn't help learners use the articles. Coming from the Classic tradition, their stated intention was to prevent further deterioration of the English language; while this is understandable, for the learner, it remains a little disappointing because it doesn't facilitate learning.

In their discussion of the indefinite article, they point out that *an* is the original form of the indefinite article, and that it is etymologically identical with *one*. They also cover most of the reasons for the pronunciation difference, skipping only an explanation of why *a* is used in front of a long *u* as in *united*. They go on to give a few examples of the indefinite article used with nouns belonging to a general class. They conclude their 1931 coverage of articles with expressions like: *a few weeks*, *a dozen of those eggs*, and *a dollar an ounce*.

Descriptive English Grammar, 1950

Times change though; in the 1950 Preface to *Descriptive English Grammar*, House and Harman refocus their efforts, saying "The emphasis in the revision is definitely on the living language." In their 1950 edition, the dramatically changed focus gives rise to many more examples; however, again the learner is not considered. The orthographic difference between *Give me a book from the shelf* and *Give me the book from the shelf* is provided without explanation as to how one would go about trying to decide which one to use. Their examples illustrating the generic use of *the* and the indefinite article suffer from the same lack.

The Sentence and Its Parts, 1961

In the 1961 edition of *The Sentence and Its Parts*, Long begins his coverage, noting that *the* is the unstressed variant of *that*, but he doesn't touch on intonation which, to a large degree, accounts for the difference between the stressed *this* and *that* (demonstratives) and the unstressed *the*. However, he moves on, explaining:

The element of pointing is normally weaker with *the* than with the demonstratives. There is a similar directing of the attention; but there is more dependence on obviousness and less on selection by means of pointing of one kind or another. In this respect determinative *the* is a great deal like nounal *he* and *it*. Characteristically *the* indicates that identification seems complete on the basis of conspicuousness in the particular situation or context².

His concepts of “pointing,” “direction of the attention,” and “conspicuousness in the particular situation” are potentially very helpful to the learner; however, the examples that follow, like in most texts, are not explained. This lack, I believe, provides one of the largest stumbling blocks, preventing non-native speakers from more easily internalizing the relevant portions of the grammar. Thus, focusing on each of the examples, showing how they illustrate the points he makes, would greatly facilitate the learners understanding. A sentence like *I'm afraid **the** milk* is sour only makes sense after all members of the conversation know what particular quantity of milk is being referred to. It's the milk, for example, that someone has just smelled or tasted. A sentence like *Mary's in **the** garage* only makes sense after the home site is known to all the interlocutors, and only when that particular home site has only one garage, which most do. Similarly, because each household usually receives only one newspaper, *Where's **the** paper* will make sense; however, in this particular case, it will make sense only when it fits into the interlocutors' mind frame. If it doesn't, the response will probably be, *What paper*.

Conspicuous is only conspicuous when it's really conspicuous!

Long's treatment of categorical plurals is potentially helpful:

The difference between the categorical plural with *the* and the general plural without determiners is not always clearly felt, but it is basically significant. *The Germans have had trouble with all their neighbors* is a statement about a national grouping and implies nothing about individual Germans. *Germans are good workers* is a statement about individual Germans, looked at in general but as individuals nevertheless. It does not imply that every German is a good worker; allowance for exceptions is understood³.

Of course, the fact that the existence of exceptions should be understood needs to be articulated, especially to the non-native speaker. In including the generic use of *the* in what he calls “representative singulars,” Long tries to provide some organization. In this class, such phrases as *in the morning*, *by the dozen*, *bad for the throat*, *as far as the eye could see*, *the American husband*, and *playing the fool* are treated. Many of these examples are explained, noting that when “applied to people and their institutions, the representative singular with *the* gives an effect of detachment, as in *the Cuban* or *the Church*.

Long explains that “definite articles are common with names of parts of the body in some situations where possessives of personals might be expected⁴.” However, here again, the non-native speaker is not aided. How does one go about choosing whether to use the personal pronoun or the *in* such phrases as the following?

grabbed George by the arm or *grabbed George by his arm*
chilled us to the bone or * *chilled us to our bone*

look me in *the* eye or look me in *my* eye

look a gift horse in *the* mouth or * look a gift horse in *its* mouth

He includes in this section such metaphorical expressions as *down in the mouth*, *pay through the nose*, and *this is a pain in the neck*.

In the following section, he covers the use of the definite article with proper names, stating “true proper nouns ordinarily have no article;” however, just what constitutes a “true proper noun” is not explained. Rather than explaining, a list of exceptions precedes the usual note that “oceans, seas, rivers, groups of islands, mountains ranges, deserts, ships, trains, planes, and hotels normally have *the*.” He also points out that “*the* is not used in some phrasal proper names in which the pluralizer nouns are heads” such as islands, bays, lakes, mountains, counties, forts, cities, streets, university names and sometimes their buildings, and parks.” Of course, this kind of jargon leaves the layman in the dust. Is the *Lookout* from *Lookout Mountain* a pluralizer noun? Is the *Main* from *Main Street* a pluralizer noun? And if *Main* is a pluralizer noun, then, is *Smoky* from the *Smoky Mountains* also a pluralizer noun?

His treatment of articles and adjectives ignores the use of *the* with the superlative form of adjectives, although he does cover the use of *the* in phrases like quite *the thing*, and *the sooner the better*.

In discussing the indefinite article, Long provides a lot of helpful information:

In most constructions singular forms of pluralizers must have determiners. *A* is their minimum determiner. Often what is identified by *a* has not had previous mention in the context but continues to be important after the first mention. Once identification is established, however inexact, *a* becomes unusable.

Like general *one* and substitute *one*, the indefinite article originally

developed from the numeral *one*. In its most characteristic uses *a* is now concerned with identification more than with number. In *I wanted **an** A in **the** course* the unit **an** A and the unit **the** course are alike singular, and singular number is unemphasized in the two units alike. In *I wanted **one** A in **the** course* the use of the numeral *one* gives number central importance. But in some uses the indefinite article *a* is still semantically very close to the numeral *one*⁵.

If the two sentences cited directly above are to have instructive force, the learner needs to know just how these two sentences are different semantically. In *I wanted **an** A in **the** course*, because of their singularity, we will understand that a final grade of A is desired; however, in *I wanted **one** A in **the** course*, there is no such understanding. Rather, we will understand that out of all the graded material in the course (such as homework, quizzes, and tests) what the student wants is at least one A on one of the things s/he has done for the course.

He continues:

A often suggests what is thought of as a reasonable allotment is a single specimen: one wife, one camera at hand. Thus *Does he have **a** wife* contrasts with *Does he have **any** children*. But sometimes *a* is used where *any* might be expected.

Contrast *He doesn't have **a** friend in the world* with *He doesn't have **any** money*. The indefinite article *a* approaches each in meaning when it modifies names of units of measurement (of time, distance, size, weight, etc.).

Like the definite article *the*, the indefinite article sometimes marks representative singulars. *A* lacks the effect of detachment that *the* has in this use. *A* approaches *any* here, but *any* is more sweeping and leaves no room for exceptions.

a good house is warm in winter
a cat is relatively independent
shopping is hard on a man

The indefinite article normally modifies only singular pluralizers. It often modifies nounal units which are plural in form but singular in force, as in *she gave me a bad thirty minutes*⁶.

(Just as an aside, it is interesting to note the mind set of some of the authors who composed these examples, i.e. the last two in this section. There are many other examples here and in other texts, so don't miss this subtle information concerning the authors' cultural milieu.)

English Grammar Simplified, 1963

Cedric Gale redid James C. Fernald's *English Grammar Simplified*, so with abject apologies to James C. Fernald, I will use Gale when referring to what has been written by him and/or them. The vocabulary they employ is similar to that of House and Harman, who refer to the articles as definitive adjectives; however, Gale labels them as limiting adjectives while referring to them as the definite and indefinite articles. While Gale goes into great detail about how to pronounce the definite and indefinite articles in various environments, all very valuable to the language learner, he does not go into the same detail when discussing when to use each.

His three cardinal rules for the use of the are:

1. To indicate an object so well known as to not need description: *The man is here* (e.g. the man we have been expecting).

2. To indicate an object about to be described: ***The** story (which I am about to relate) is a sad one.*
3. To indicate an object emphatically designated, as if the only one worthy of consideration: *He made **the** speech of the occasion⁷.*

After a brief description of the generic use of *the* (of course, ***the** dog*), adjectives with *the* used as nouns ((lying in the face of ugly reality), ***the** good is more important than **the** beautiful*), and *the* with comparatives (*the wiser he* (no, it wasn't *she*) *is, the better*); a would-be learner is left to his or her own devices. In fine tuning his discussion of the generic, however, Gale points out:

*Man or woman, however, is used in the general or generic way without the article: **Man** can adapt himself to any climate. Man without the article may be used: (a) To denote all mankind, including women and children: **Man** is mortal. (b) To denote male human beings as a class, contrasted with woman: **Man** is more adventurous, woman more domestic⁸. (Well, what can I say? It was 1963.)*

A Contribution from *the* present

Because over the years I have done a lot of work with computers and software development and have used flowcharts to work out bugs in my programming (well, yes, had I used them in the planning stages, I might not have needed to use them later), it occurred to me that it may be possible to create a list of questions, the answers to which would enable non-linguistically sophisticated speakers to decide on their own whether or not to use which or none of the articles. What I have tried to do is create a list of questions that, at least in part, maps some of the questions native speakers of English consider unconsciously when they make decisions about the use of articles. My hope is to develop a relatively short list of questions that

once committed to memory, would serve to bolster this area of non-native speakers' internalized grammar of the English language. Users need to be minimally knowledgeable about the names of certain parts of speech; however, those who are in need of this type of help will probably already have at least a working knowledge of such words as *adjective*, *noun*, *singular*, *plural*, *countable*, *uncountable* in English. The current list of questions with what I hope are illustrative examples follows:

1. Does a superlative adjective precede the noun?

Examples: *the* highest peak, *the* most significant difference,
the least frequent occurrence, *the* greatest problem
the deepest water, *the* hottest coffee
the leftmost character, *the* last time

If [Yes], use *the*. If [No], go to the next question.

2. Does an ordinal number precede the noun?

Examples: *the* first section, *the* fourth chapter, *the* thirty-seventh game
the second floor of the building, *the* fifth door on your right

If [Yes], use *the*. If [No], go to the next question.

3. Do the words next, same, or other precede the word?

Examples: *the* next township, *the* next series, *the* same feeling
the next smelly garbage, *the* other day
the same reaction, *the* other man in the boat

If [Yes], use *the*. If [No], go to the next question.

4. Is it a noun like *imagination*, *education*, *determination*?

Examples: a) feelings are important, cf *the* feelings I had
b) imagination excites the senses, cf *a* good imagination helps
the imagination she displayed
c) determination plays an important part,

cf *the* determination I saw in her eyes

If [Yes], and your sentence is similar to the first half of the examples, don't use *the*; use *the* if your sentence is similar to the second half of the examples.

If [No], go to the next question. Check #7 and #8 below for relevant information.

5. Is it a plural noun?

Examples: a) dogs make good pets, cf *the* dogs living across the street
b) reports are necessary, cf *the* reports we filed

If [Yes], and your sentence is similar to the first half of the examples, generally no *the* is used; use *the* if your sentence is similar to the second half of the examples.

If [No], go to the next question. Check #7 and #8 below for relevant information.

6. Is it an uncountable noun?

Examples: a) furniture makes the room, cf *the* furniture in the living room
b) coffee contains caffeine, cf *the* coffee grown in Columbia
c) mustard is good on hotdogs, cf *the* mustard on your face

If [Yes], and your sentence is similar to the first half of the examples, generally no *the* is used; use *the* if your sentence is similar to the second half of the examples.

If [No], go to the next question. Check #7 and #8 below for relevant information.

7. Is it particular to a person, place, thing, or situation?

Examples: *the* chef's hat, in *the* kitchen, in *the* basement, *the* key
the car (the family car), *the* weather in Miami, , read *the* newspaper

If [Yes], use *the*. If [No], go to the next question.

8. Does it belong to something?

Examples: *the* burnt corner of the table, *the* flush handle on the toilet,

the bank of the river, *the* heel of the shoe, *the* beginning of the report

If [Yes], use *the*. If [No], go to the next question.

9. Does the noun refer to some shared knowledge, implied or prior knowledge?

Examples: *the* books I bought last week, *the* one you liked,
the shirt you saw in *the* window

If [Yes], use *the*. If [No], go to the next question.

10. Is the noun used in its generic sense?

Examples: *the* dog makes a good pet, *the* radio was invented,
the computer has helped and hurt

If [Yes], use *the*. If [No], go to the next question.

11. Is this the first time to mention the noun?

Examples: a) I bought *a* shirt, but it didn't fit. I took *the* shirt back the following day. (Both sentences refer to the same shirt.)

b) It started out as *a* lovely day. *The* day ended too soon. (Both sentences refer to the same day.)

If [Yes], and your sentence is similar to the first sentence in the examples, use *a*; use *the* if your sentence is similar to the second sentence in the examples.

If [No], go to the next question. Check #7 and #8 above for relevant information.

Well, that was it; that flowchart-type questionnaire I promised at the very beginning. I hope you will try it out and get back to me with your criticisms, suggestions, wise cracks, and other irreverent comments.

Endnotes

1. Homer C. House and Susan E. Harman, *Descriptive English Grammar*

(New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1931), p. v.

2. Ralph B. Long, *The Sentence and Its Parts* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 294.
3. Ibid. p. 295.
4. Ibid. p. 296.
5. Ibid. p. 299.
6. Ibid. p. 300-301.
7. James C. Fernald, *English Grammar Simplified* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, Inc., 1963), p. 75.
8. Ibid. p. 75.

