A Common Error with Japanese Learners of English: Article Usage

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Abstract

Research has shown that article selection is the single most frequently occurring error with Japanese learners of English (JLE). This essay explores the *a/an* and *the* articles as well as the oft overlooked *zero* article. The major attempts at creating systems to explain article usage are briefly covered before breaking down the reasons why JLE struggle with articles. In a two-step conclusion the essay first explains that while many detailed article systems and approaches exist they are too complicated and/or filled with far too many exceptions to be taught to a non-native speaker of English. It suggests that articles must simply be learned and memorized through practice and repetition for usage. Building upon that disheartening conclusion the essay recommends that the best way to teach articles may be to not focus on them at all, but to integrate various examples of article usage into basic grammar lessons.

Keywords: definite article, indefinite article, zero article, Japanese learners of English

1. Introduction

Articles may appear simple at first glance, but are one of the most problematic areas for non-native speakers of English (Han, Chodorow, & Leacock, 2006; Master, 2002; Whitman, 1974). Article usage errors are often more frequent with students whose L1 contains no articles (Han et al., 2006). Chinese, Korean, and Russian are common examples. This paper will focus on common errors by native speakers of Japanese, another language which contains no articles.

Articles traditionally fall into the definite, *a/an,* indefinite, *the,* and zero/null forms. They are used as determiners (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2003) to specify a noun phrase's (NP) definiteness or indefiniteness (Crystal, 1997). Eastwood (2002) adds that articles can also be used to indicate a generalized meaning or to describe or classify an NP. Article usage is vast and the rules governing them can be complex for native and non-native speakers of English (Master, 2002; Palmer, 1947).

This essay will first cover the grammatical fundamentals of article usage. Next, the essay will examine the types of errors common with Japanese learners of English (JLE) and the possible reasons behind the errors. Lastly, the essay will examine various pedagogical teaching suggestions that may help decrease article usage errors.

2. Grammatical Analysis of Articles in the English Language

In the English language, articles are some of the most frequently used words (Master, 2002). They include *a, an, the,* and the zero article, sometimes referred to as the null article or Ø. It should be noted that some scholars (Master, 1997) differentiate between two forms of the zero article, calling them "null/zero" or "Ø1/Ø2" (Master, 2002). This essay will use *zero* article from this point forth and it will be used to refer to any and all forms of the article in question. *A* and *the* are among the top five most frequently used words in the English language; however, the zero article occurs even more often (Master, 2002). Articles are a subclass of determiners (Fromkin et al., 2003), but they do not always function within this classification. There are four functions of articles, only two of which act as a determiner. These functions include: neither quantity nor determiner, quantity alone, determiner alone, or both quantity and determiner (Whitman, 1974). Articles are most often divided into indefinite (non-specific), *a/an,* and definite (specific), *the* (Burton-Roberts, 1976; Liu & Gleason, 2002). However, the zero article "is presumed to be both definite and indefinite at the same time" (Berezowski, 2009, p. 2). Not all scholars view articles in such a direct and dichotomic explanation of indefinite or definite. Whitman (1974) explains that while articles may appear in the same grammatical structure, there is a misconception that articles are primarily the same, "differing only along a dimension of 'definiteness/indefiniteness' or 'specificity/non-specificity.' *A/an* and *the* are, in fact, entirely different syntactic entities, quite unrelated to each other" (p. 254).

3. Articles

3-1. The Definite Article: the

Definite words "refer to a unique object insofar as the speaker and listener are concerned" (Fromkin et al., 2003, p. 186). Within the subclass of articles, *the,* is the definite article. In the example, "I bought a car", no assumption is made that a particular car is being referenced, simply a description of an action that took place. However, in "I bought the car", it is assumed a certain car is being referred to. According to Fromkin et al. (2003), it is common for indefinite articles to be used in the beginning of a discourse and definite articles will later be used in pointing to an NP whose referents are agreed upon by both the speaker and listener. In short, when using *the,* "the speaker implies that the recipient should be able to identify the intended referent" (Juvonen, 2006, p. 484). Traditionally the usage of *the* can be broken into 4 subcategories:

(a) unique referent e.g., *the Pope*; (b) referent physically present e.g., *Pass me the pepper please*; (c) referent previously mentioned in the discourse; and (d) specific referent assumed to be known to the hearer e.g., *the* man is standing behind you (Lui & Gleason, 2002, pp. 2-3)

In addition to these 4 subcategories, Huddleston (1988) remarks that in rare cases *the* can also act as an adverb of degree (e.g., **The** *slower* we move, the faster we die.).

Similar to many rules in grammar, if rules regarding articles used in discourse are broken, then the sentence is viewed as unacceptable. For example:

A: The price on a red convertible I like was lowered yesterday.

B: What are you going to do?

A: I just bought the car.

If the final sentence was changed to:

A: I just bought a car.

Most people would consider this sentence now unacceptable. As Fromkin et al. (2003) points out, the inclusion or lack thereof *the* can change the meaning of a sentence dramatically, for example:

The terrorists are in control of the government.

The terrorists are in *the* control of the government. (Fromkin et al., 2003, p. 212)

In the second sentence the government is in control over the terrorists which is a stark contrast to the first sentence in which the terrorists are in control.

The can be used with any noun (Eastwood, 2002), but proper names are not usually preceded by *the*. There are some exceptions such as The Statue of Liberty, The Big Apple, and The Amazon. In the case of *the William McDonalds, the* is used to indicate the family of William McDonald. An additional special case is when a noun phrase is modified by a prepositional phrase (e.g., *The America* of the 50s...) (Fromkin et al., 2003).

3-2. The Indefinite Article: *a/an*

When using the *a/an* article, the speaker implies that the recipient should not necessarily be able identify a specific referent (Juvonen, 2006). Unlike *the, a/an* is used with singular nouns exclusively (Eastwood, 2002), but not all, only those that are considered countable (Palmer, 1947). However, it is not that straightforward. Most non-countable singular nouns can be converted to countable form (Palmer, 1947). *Grass* is typically a non-countable singular noun, but in "a grass of some type could be planted here to stop erosion", *grass* is used as a singular countable noun. Palmer (1947) outlines varied uses for indefinite articles, but differentiates between what he calls the "two very distinct varieties" of the *a/an* article (p. 65). In the first case, it is acting as "the numerical or quantitative article" and is functioning as a "shortened and weaker form" of *one* (Palmer, 1947, p. 65). This is a way of showing less emphasis on the *oneness* of an NP. The other function of *a/an* is to essentially mean "a certain" (Palmer, 1947). In the example, "Oh, did you hear? There was a shark at the beach today", *a* is referring to a "a certain shark".

Palmer (1947) goes on to explain various occasional uses for the indefinite article. "*A* sometimes means: *any particular individual thing or person chosen at random as being characteristic of all*

others, or a thing called a or that sort of thing that is called a" (p. 66; italics in original). Another use for *a* is when it means 'every' (Palmer, 1947). Only in these two last cases does Palmer (1947) feel that *a/an* act as the true indefinite article.

Burton-Roberts explains in further detail the four functions of the indefinite article.

1. Generic determiner, e.g., *a* whale is a mammal
2. Specific indefinite determiner of subjects of non-generic sentences e.g., *a* whale struck the ship
   a. Determiner of objects in non-generic, non-copulative sentences,
      e.g., the whale struck *a* ship
3. Attributive indefinite determiner of complement NP's in predicates, e.g., John is *a* scientist
4. Non-specific indefinite determiner, e.g., I'm going to marry *a* millionaire
   (adapted from Burton-Roberts 1976, p. 427)

Burton-Roberts points out that *a* does not always point to a referent as we see in the third function. John is the only referent. Burton-Roberts (1976) explains that in sentences like this, "scientist" is simply attributing a "quality of being a scientist" onto John (p. 428).

3-3. The Zero Article

Berezowski (2009) points out that the definite and indefinite articles in English have been singled out and discussed in scholarly works as early as the mid-1500s. The concept of the zero article in its current explanation did not begin to show up in scholarly works until about 60 years ago. In the realm of linguistics, *zero* is "an abstract unit... that has no physical realization in speech" (Crystal, 1997, p.440). The zero article is when a NP does not require a determiner or in other words, the zero article is the absence of an article (Berezowski, 2009). The zero article is somewhat controversial in that most scholarly articles and books on English grammar do not even mention this odd part of speech (Berezowski, 2009). Hurford (1994) mentions that there is a definite article and an indefinite article and adds, "that's all － there are no more articles" (p. 18). This non-recognition of the zero article may be creating the most confusion with English learners while trying to understand the article system (Plamer 1947). Palmer (1947) feels that where we find no physical article, what he has coined the *alogistic (non−word) article,* it "is perhaps the most important point in connection with the learning of English article-usage" and adds "[t]he distinction between *the* and *a* is difficult enough, but where we find neither *the* nor *a* the difficulty turns into hopeless perplexity" (p. 67). To add even more to zero article's controversy as an article, when its existence is acknowledged, it is believed to be both indefinite and definite at the same time (Berezowski, 2009).

Zero article usage can be better understood through the following six contrasting NP in

which Master (2002) uses Ø to represent the zero article.

1. mass (Ø cake) vs. count (a cake)

2. general (Ø stone) vs. particular (a stone)

3. abstract (Ø prison) vs. concrete (a prison)

4. adjective (Ø Fool that he was [=He was foolish]) vs. noun (He was a fool)

5. name (Ø director of the program, Ø Dr. Smith) vs. description (the director

of the program, the doctor)

6. familiar (Ø next week) vs. unfamiliar (the next week)

(adapted from Master, 2002, p. 337)

4. Usage Factors

Choosing the correct article is incredibly complex due to the nature of multiple heterogene-ous factors and rules (Han et al., 2006; Palmer, 1947). Complicating things even further, "almost every rule for articles has many exceptions or subrules" (Han et al., 2006, p. 117). Palmer (1947) ad-mits that with many of the exceptions that are to be found, often un-familiar terms such as insti-tutions and proper names, can cause confusion and hesitation with even native English speakers, e.g., "*University College, London* (a college in London named *University*) or *The University College, London, (The College of The University of London)*" (p. 73). Colloquial factors also create an additional set of exceptions (Palmer, 1947; Masters, 1997). Palmer (1947) states that they must simply be memorized one by one.

Memorizing exceptions aside, scholars have made numerous attempts at bringing order to the article system. Palmer (1947) has a very detailed list of rules that govern article usage; how-ever, it is too long to summarize in this essay. His first and certainly most straightforward rule is worth taking note of: "If a non-proper noun is not preceded by some special determinative word (e.g. *this, my, many, all, one*) it must be preceded by one of the [articles]" (Palmer 1947, p. 62). Han et al. (2006) has attempted to simplify the process by grouping the rules into lexical (e.g. countability of the head noun in the NP), syntactic (e.g. use of superlative adjective, '*the* best'), discourse (e.g. repetition usage), and general knowledge factors (e.g. colloquial usage).

Liu and Gleason (2002) report that, regardless of phrasing, article choice begins with the ob-servation of the NP and then the determination of its semantic function. Their method attempts to classify the usage of articles based on the observations of the semantic function of the NP. The semantic function of the NP can be classified by two binary discourse options. The first is whether the NP is a specific referent or not (+-SR). The other binary option is whether the hearer knows the referent, referred to as (+-HK). From here, there are four combinations of the binary options which help determine which article can and cannot be used (1. -SK , +HK 2.+SK, + HK 3. +SK, -HK 4. -SK, -HK) (Lui & Gleason, 2002).

While the 3 above examples make no explicit mention in their grouping process, phonemic factors play a subtle role in the more precise article choice as Eastwood (2002) points out. "Before a consonant sound the articles are *a* /ə/ and *the* /ðə/. Before a vowel sound they are *an* /ən/ and *the* /ðɪ/ " (Eastwood, 2002, p. 199).

> a /ə/ shelf
> an /n/ accident
> the /ə/ self
> the /ɪ/ accident

It is the pronunciation of the next word which determines /ə/ /n/ /ɪ/, not the spelling.
Some difficult combinations:

a one day event	an only child
a university	an umbrella
a European country	an error
a holiday	an hour

(Eastwood, 2002, p. 199)

5. Common Errors by Japanese Learners of English

Research has shown that ESL learners make article errors in a consistent manner (Rozovskaya & Roth, 2010). Japanese ESL learners are no exception. Bryant (1984) conducts research in which he concludes that the majority of mistakes that Japanese learners of English make are L2 errors (intralingual). However, these errors tend to be minor and do not have as detrimental an impact on communication as L1 errors (interlingual). L1 errors tend to originate when languages, in this case, Japanese and English, have large syntactical differences, and students "unconscious[ly] attempt to transfer to English certain native Japanese structures" (Bryant, 1984, p. 1). In Bryant (1984) research, the single highest occurring error was an L1 error, incorrect omission of the definite and indefinite articles. A similar conclusion is also reached by Izumi, Uchimoto, Saiga, Supnithi, and Ishihara (2003). In their research data, they conclude overwhelmingly that article errors are the single most frequently occurring mistake that Japanese learners of English make, omission type errors being the most common. Other article errors include correct article selection of the indefinite or definite article and over-inclusion. Over-inclusion is a situation where the zero article is the appropriate choice, sometimes referred to as "error of commission" (Liu & Gleason, 2002, p. 4).

While article omission may seem like a small error, it creates sentences that are not only grammatically incorrect, but will make them "extremely vague and nonspecific" (Bryant, 1984, p. 4). But why are articles so problematic? Master (2002) believes that just because of their sheer frequency in the English language, it makes "continuous conscious rule application difficult over

an extended stretch of discourse" (p. 332). In addition, he writes that "function words are normally unstressed and consequently very difficult if not impossible for an non-native speaker to discern, thus affecting the availability of input in the spoken mode; and the article system stacks multiple functions onto a single morpheme" (Master, 2002, p. 332). The different functions that are often stacked include definiteness, countability, and number.

6. Pedagogical Implications

It is without question that teaching articles to a JLE can be a daunting task. Liu and Gleason (2002) refer to it as "hard grammar" and write, in regard to ESL, that it is often considered "very difficult if not impossible to teach" (p. 2). Similarly, Master (2002) reports that "there are some who maintain that the system is not learnable in any conscious way and is therefore not teachable" (p. 334). Fortunately, Master (2002) does not feel that way and responds to such sentiment with "[if] we remain critical of any misuse of the article system, we are obliged to provide some means for them to understand and utilize the system" (pp. 334-335).

Whitman (1974) believes that many of the errors in article usage are not due to their lexical complexity, but in the sense that linguists and teachers have held a common misconception about the article, mainly that *a/an* is the indefinite article and *the* is the definite article. He believes that *a/an* and *the* to be so different, that using the term and calling them both 'article' is to generalize them too much.

Ignoring the language barrier for one moment and assuming a teacher could explain Palmer's (1947) twelve rules, or Liu and Gleason's (2002) semantic binary option system to JLE in fluent Japanese, which many cannot, the students would be very bored, if not hopelessly lost. There is perhaps a better method to increase article usage proficiency without having to directly teach articles.

Instead of trying to teach, explain, or even interpret the idea of indefiniteness and definiteness, Whitman (1974) proposesa learning method where article selection is broken down into six steps that can easily be adapted to almost any classroom lesson. The key to his method is not singling out article selection, rather incorporating it within relevant and related grammar lessons.

In Whitman (1974) process, quantity is covered in one step, generic plural in the next, noncount nouns in after that, and so on. Articles are not the central core of the lesson, but play a vital and relevant role in each of the steps. In step three, non-count nouns, Whitman (1974) emphasizes that a/an should not be singled out and discussed as it "can only serve to confuse" (p. 259). Only the semantic plurality and syntactic singularity nature of non-count nouns should be focused upon (Whitman, 1974).

In Whitman's (1974) sixth step he recommends that the discussion of generic article usage is "probably best delayed considerably" and he goes into no further detail of any pedagogical impli-

cations and merely states "[t]hey are not, in fact, all that commonly found, and are left entirely out of many EFL texts, which teach the generic plural alone" (p. 261). This mimics Master (2002) sentiments as well in which he believes that some more complex conditions of articles such as the difference between generic and specific uses of *a* should be saved for highest level of ESL students.

Some foreseeable problems with any approach is the large list of exceptions. For example, Whitman's (1974) approach has us teach count and non-count nouns; however, they are not always one or the other. Most non-count nouns can be transformed into count form, as mentioned earlier, or count nouns into non-count form, e.g., "The vet found bits of chewed-up *pencil* in the dog's stomach" (Master , 2002, p. 334).

There are also colloquial considerations. Water is a word often learned very early by my students. It is a non-count noun; however, you will often hear in a restaurant or similar location "a water please" or "four waters". This means "a cup of water", but often in spoken colloquial English we leave out "cup" as Masters (2002) points out in "a coffee" and "two sugars" (p. 334).

7. Conclusion

Many grammar textbooks would lead us to believe that only two articles exist, *a/an* and *the,* and are used either as indefinite or definite determiners for a NP (Crystal, 1997; Eastwood, 2002). A deeper search into the subject reveals a much more complex picture. One in which three articles exists, *a/an, the,* and the zero article; a system that is rife with rules, sub-rules, and exceptions. It is also revealed that the concept of indefinite and definite result in half-truths, representing only some of the usage of articles. Whitman (1974) points out that the label of determiners is misleading and only applicable to two of the article's four functions. Scholars such as Whitman (1974) believe the term article is over-generalized and simplified, and it simply adds to the large confusion often surrounding the subject because of article's syntactic differences.

Through research, articles have been shown to be the single most frequently occurring errors made by not only Japanese English learners, but nearly all ESL students. Though many rules have been written, systems organized, and exceptions cataloged, it is possible that the best way to increase article usage proficiency is by not focusing on articles at all, but perhaps adopting a method similar to Whitman's suggestion in which correct article usage is simply memorized through examples and repetition during more generalized grammar lesson, where article are not the center of the activity or lesson.

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日本人英語学習者に共通してみられるエラー：冠詞の使用

ダイクス・ロバート

　研究によると、冠詞は日本人英語学習者（JLE）に最も頻繁に起こるエラーであるとされている。本論では冠詞の a/an、the、そしてよく見過ごされがちな無冠詞について考察する。まず、英語の冠詞体系を説明した主な試みについてふれた後、なぜ日本人英語学習者にとって冠詞の習得が困難なのかについて述べていく。また、本論では 2 段階で結論を展開する。まず、冠詞詳細なシステムやアプローチが多く存在するが、それらは非ネイティブ学習者に教えるには複雑すぎであり、それに加え、もしくは単に例外が多すぎるという点を説明する。そして、これは簡潔に言えば、冠詞を使用の練習や繰り返しによって学ばれなければならないということを示している。期待外れな結論となってしまうが、この結論から本論は、冠詞を教える最善の方法は冠詞に焦点をあてず、その豊富な使用例を基本的な文法の指導の中で導入、紹介していくことであるということを示唆する。

キーワード：定冠詞、不定冠詞、無冠詞、日本人英語学習者