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## WHAT A LANGUAGE STUDENT SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE ENGLISH ARTICLE

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*Данная статья освещает пять аспектов английского артикля, предлагая изложенный материал на заметку студентам, изучающим английский язык в профессиональных целях. Рассматриваются такие вопросы, как определение статуса артикля в иерархии языковых единиц, количество артиклей в английском языке, семантическая структура артиклей, их коммуникативная и прагматическая значимость.*

**Ключевые слова:** определенный артикль, неопределенный артикль, детерминация, специфическая отнесенность, классифицирующая отнесенность, тематические маркеры, рематические маркеры, описательное определение, уточняющее определение.

### Introduction

English articles have been the subject of hot discussions for many years. What has generally been recognized is that the use of articles often turns into stumbling blocks for students of English, especially for those whose first language is synthetic. Different language types represent different mentalities, including different comprehension of determination and its means. Therefore, teachers and learners have tried numerous techniques for integrating the system of English articles into their native language. There exist two basic ways of learning how to use articles correctly. The first one is developing the necessary communicative skills through countless usages, which can only be achieved in a corresponding language environment. Another way is creating a system of rules governing the use of articles in the language by understanding the basic principles of their functioning. Both methods (practical and theoretical) should complement one another.

The information herein is intended to sum up the most essential facts on the English articles. It may be offered to language students, providing that they have already fundamental acquirements in this field. There have been considered such problems as the identification of the article status in the hierarchy of language units, the number of articles in modern English, their semantic and communicative evaluation, as well as pragmatic estimation in the context.

### Main Body

1. **The identification of the status of the article.** There exist two basic approaches to the problem of the article status. Some scholars (A. Smirnitsky, M. Ganshina, N. Vasilevskaya, M. Blokh) identify the article with the morpheme-like element, which builds up with the nounal stem a specific morpheme. Professor M. Blokh, for instance, considers the article in the light of the oppositional theory. The category of article determination of the noun is regarded as one which is based on two binary oppositions: one of them is upper, the other is lower. The opposition of the higher level operates in

the whole system of articles and contrasts the definite article with the noun against the two other forms of article determination of the noun – the indefinite article and the meaningful absence of the article. The opposition of the lower level operates within the sphere of realizing the categorical meaning of non-identification (the sphere of the weak member of the upper opposition) and contrasts the two types of generalization – the relative generalization and the absolute generalization [1, p. 72].

Others (B. Ilyish, B. Khaimovich, B. Rogovskaya) consider the article a structural part of speech, a self-sufficient word, which forms with the modified noun a syntactic syntagma. They contradict the oppositional theory, suggesting that the members of any opposition must belong to the same lexeme and have similar meanings. But *a* and *the* do not belong to the same lexeme and their meanings are not identical. The indefinite article *a* possesses the meaning of “oneness” in addition to the meaning of “indefiniteness”, which cannot be found in the meaning of the definite article *the*. Besides, the “demonstrative” meaning of *the* is alien to *a*. For similar reasons *a table* – *the table* are not analytical members of some noun opposition, and *a(an)*, *the* are not grammatical word-morphemes [2, p. 214].

In recent works on the problem of the article determination of English nouns an opinion is expressed that in the hierarchy of language units the article occupies a peculiar place – the place intermediary between the word and the morpheme [3, p. 113].

Taking into account all the arguments we are apt to regard the article as an independent word similar to other structural words of the English vocabulary. One more reason may be added to this consideration. Both articles, *a* and *the*, are related by conversion to other parts of speech. Thus, the indefinite article may convert into the numeral equal to one in such formations as *a hundred*, *a dozen* etc. Otherwise, we'll have to admit the fact of left-hand connection of numerals with articles (123 – *a hundred and twenty tree*, 1235 – *a thousand two hundred and thirty five* etc), which is impossible. The definite article in its turn may convert into the conjunction functioning as a part of a comparative construction *the more...the better*. In such constructions either adjectives (*the richer he gets*, *the more friends he has*), or adverbs (*the more we know*, *the more we forget*) may be used, the combinability of which excludes the article use. The article may hardly combine with the whole word-combination either. So, the parallel components *the ... the* of comparative constructions are conjunctions, not articles. As the property of combinability is proper to the word, not to the morpheme, the status of the article as a structural word is quite justified.

**2. The number of articles.** Accordingly opinions differ as to the number of articles. In the oppositional theory the system of articles in English is described as one consisting of three articles – the definite article, the indefinite article and the zero article. The zero article is found in the contexts where neither the definite nor the indefinite article is used. Many scholars believe it is better to speak of the zero article rather than of the absence of the article for the same reason that we ascribe the zero marker to the “unmarked” member of the opposition. We speak of zero units in situations where the grammatical meaning needs to be made explicit. So, the theory of the zero article is directly connected with the theory of the zero morpheme.

But if we assume, that the article is the word, the concept of “a zero word” seems hardly reasonable. We do not speak of zero prepositions or zero particles. Moreover, a grammatical zero morpheme is created in an opposition owing to the relative nature of grammatical meanings. As proved above, the articles are not grammatical morphemes and their meanings are not relative.

Consequently, it appears more feasible to stick to the theory of two articles.

**3. The categorical function and semantic evaluation of the article.** The English articles are multifunctional and polysemantic.

The invariant categorical function of all the articles (i.e. the function all of them are used in) is that of determination. Any human language has a system of means used to determine words as parts of speech. In analytical languages the article is the basic noun determiner. Determiners are words which have a distribution including the article position. The role of determiners is to specify the range of reference of the noun by making it definite or indefinite. Besides the article there are other determiners in English: possessive, demonstrative and indefinite pronouns *my, this, some*, cardinal numerals *one, two*, nouns in the possessive case *boy's, Ann's*. Most determiners can never go together, as their meanings are either identical, or exclusive: *the Ann's room\*, a his book\**.

The semantic evaluation of the article presupposes the analysis of each determiner separately and taken in comparison to each other. With a slight divergence in terminology and interpretation it may be put in the following way.

**3.1.** The semantic structure of the indefinite article includes *classification, indefiniteness, introduction, quantification*. Each of the semantic properties is realized under specific contextual conditions.

1. The classifying semantics of the indefinite article is revealed in classifying utterances of the type: *A book is the best present. What a boring story! You look like a rose!*

2. The meaning of "indefiniteness" is realized when the referent of the noun is not a real thing, but it exists in the speaker's imagination only. Those are sentences containing modal verbs or verbs with modal meaning, forms of the Subjunctive Mood, Future Tense forms, negative and interrogative sentences: *If only I were a bird! Have you ever seen a living tiger? I hope there will be a letter.*

3. Before sharing some information about the object, we are to introduce it to the hearer, thus revealing the introducing semantics of the article. *Yesterday I saw a film. Fairy tales can be used as ideal illustrations of this use: Once upon a time there lived an old man. He had a wife and a daughter. He lived in a small house.*

4. The semantics of *quantification* inherent in the indefinite article is preconditioned by its conversational relation to the numeral *one*. The meaning of "oneness" is still preserved when the article is used with nouns denoting measure, like *a minute, a year or a pound* [4].

**3.2.** The definite article may imply *identification, definition, individualization, generalization*.

1. Identification is revealed when the speaker points out something perceived with our organs of feeling. There are five different ways of getting the information about the thing existing in the objective reality. We can see it *Do you like the picture?*, hear it *I believe, the music is too loud*, feel it *The pillow is so soft!*, smell it *What is the name of the perfume?* or taste it *The soup tastes bitter.*

2. The defining semantics is connected with the so called framed perception of the reality. The frame is a structurally organized system of images. It means that the object or thing denoted by the noun is presented as a part of some complex. For example, the frame "classroom" includes a window, a blackboard and a door. So if both the speaker and the hearer know what classroom they are speaking of, the constituents of the classroom don't need any special concretization, and the definite article will be used. *Come to the blackboard! Open the door, please!*

3. Individualization is realized in the contexts when the object is represented as a unique thing, singled out from the class it belongs to. The unique nature of the

object is usually marked with the help of a particularizing attribute. *This is the easiest way out. I need the book I bought yesterday* [4].

**3.3.** In most cases the meaningful absence of the article is treated equally to the use of the indefinite article. However, there are situations where the omission of the article has its specific meaning. With no article the noun loses its general lexicogrammatical meaning of *thingness* to a certain degree and acquires the meaning of *qualitativeness*. For example, the nouns *day* and *night* used without any article stand for *light* and *darkness* rather than for the indication of time. Moreover, a greater degree of generalization of such nouns may be proved by a substitution testing, in which generalizing word combinations *in the abstract, in general, in the broadest sense* may be used: *Home should be a safe and comfortable place* > *Home (in the abstract, in general) should be a safe and comfortable place* [4].

The semantic structure of the article designates its categorial function which implies that the article expresses the category of determination, or reference to definiteness or indefiniteness. The contrastive analysis of semantic properties of the articles shows that it is essential to distinguish between two main roles of the articles – specific, or particular, reference and generic, or generalizing, reference. This is proper to both articles, as well as to the meaningful absence of the article, compare: *The tiger is dying.* (specific reference) *The tiger is in danger of dying out.* (generic reference) *I saw a film.* (specific reference) *Only a film can amuse him.* (generic reference) *Cats were fighting.* (specific reference) *Cats like milk.* (generic reference).

The semantic distinctions, which are important for countable nouns with specific reference, disappear with generic reference, thus admitting of any article use: *A telephone is useful. The telephone is useful. Telephones are useful.* This peculiarity of countable nouns should be taken into close consideration in the process of teaching and learning. The ability to determine the type of nounal reference first will significantly simplify the choice of the article.

**4. Communicative estimation of the article.** Another important aspect of the article in English is its role in structuring information, in identifying the relative importance of utterance parts. The article is one of the means of distinguishing between facts already known (the theme) and new information (the rheme): *Yesterday I saw a dog. The dog was chasing after a cat. The cat was chasing after a mouse. The mouse disappeared in a hole.* Such sentences are known to have progressive structure (Theme + Rheme). It is the most popular way of conveying information in English. Only 6% of sentences have regressive structure (Rheme + Theme).

In modern Russian the rheme is also usually placed at the end and the main means of expressing actual sentence division is word order. The two Russian sentences *Доктор вышел из кабинета* and *Из кабинета вышел доктор* differ as to the communicative significance of their parts. They will correspond to the English sentences *The doctor went out (the doctor we previously mentioned about)* and *A doctor went out (a doctor, not a nurse).*

The definite article is known to be the marker of the theme in the utterance. The other thematic elements are loose parenthesis (*as for me, as it was mentioned* etc.), detached parts of the sentence, initial position of the object in the sentence. The indefinite article is usually used as the formal indicator of the rheme. The other rhematic elements include particles *even, only*, negation, emphatic constructions *It is he who...*, inverted subjects *There is a book. Here is a bus.* etc.

Thematic elements contribute little to the meaning of the utterance as they reflect what has already been communicated, in other words they have the lowest

degree of communicative dynamism. Rhematic elements contain new information, which advances the communicative process, and have the highest degree of communicative dynamism.

**5. Pragmatic estimation of the article.** In discussing the role of the articles it is important to highlight one more aspect – their pragmatic usage. Traditionally the use of articles in written and spoken English is closely connected with the type of attribute the noun is modified. Thus, we distinguish between non-defining, or descriptive, attributes and defining, or particularizing, ones. The former type gives extra information about the noun referent, which does not require identification. Such nouns are determined by the indefinite article: *A lady of considerable charm entered the room.* The latter attribute type gives information that helps to identify the noun referent and the corresponding noun is used with the definite article: *That was the charm never seen before.*

Actually the utterance meaning is derived from the meanings of lexical items and grammatical structure. But it may be interpreted differently depending on the context and background knowledge of the interlocutors. This means that each utterance is estimated in a particular speech situation, which is the sphere of pragmatics.

Different intentions or purposes of the speaker may turn to different interpretations of the attributes attached to nouns, thus leading to the alternative article usage. Cf: *I'd like to introduce a fellow, I used to work with* (he appeared unexpectedly and this information about him is the first thing I could recollect) and *I'd like to introduce the fellow, I used to work with* (we were just discussing the relationship with former colleagues). The communicative background should help to evaluate the information of the utterance from the necessary point of view, and therefore, influence the speaker and context in this or that particular way. In communication we expect the interlocutor to understand what we say and make relevant responses.

Pragmatic estimation of the situation of speech should be applied to the methodology of article teaching, the essential stage of which is communicative approach. This defines the aim of language study as the use of appropriate language for particular situations.

### Conclusion

So, we have outlined five aspects of the English articles essential for their effective learning. But a language student needs both theory and practice. Learning language successfully comes through real and meaningful communication. Greater emphasis on skills than systems, learner-centered teaching as well as the use of authentic materials is bound to develop in learners their natural strategies for language acquisition, to advance efficient communicative skills and language competencies.

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#### **Biryuk I.B. WHAT A LANGUAGE STUDENT SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE ENGLISH ARTICLE.**

*The issue highlights five aspects of the English article offering the information to raise language students' awareness. The following items are considered: the identification of the article status in the hierarchy of language units, the number of articles in modern English, their semantic structure, as well as communicative and pragmatic evaluation.*

**Key words:** the definite article, the indefinite article, determination, specific reference, generic reference, thematic elements, rhematic elements, descriptive attribute, particularizing attribute.