

УДК 811.111'36

© I. Biryuk

NATURE AND PRAGMATICS OF THE ENGLISH ARTICLE

Keywords: the definite article, the indefinite article, the zero article, determination, specific reference, generic reference, thematic elements, rhematic elements.

Ключевые слова: определенный артикль, неопределенный артикль, нулевой артикль, детерминация, специфическая отнесенность, классифицирующая отнесенность, тематические маркеры, рематические маркеры.

The issue highlights the status of the English article, its semantic structure and function. The two main functions are singled out: determination and theme and rheme indication. Polysemantic usage of the article is mainly realized in either specific or generic reference.

Рассматриваются статус артикля в английском языке, его семантическая природа и функционирование. Выделяются две основные функции артикля: детерминирующая и регулирующая тема-рематические отношения. Устанавливается, что многообразная семантика артиклем чаще всего проявляется либо в специфической, либо в классифицирующей референтности.

The problem of English articles has been the subject of hot discussions for many years. Today the most disputable questions concerning the system of articles in English are the following: the identification of the article status in the hierarchy of language units, the number of articles, their categorial and pragmatic functions. There exist two basic approaches to the problem of the article status: some scholars consider the article a self-sufficient word which forms with the modified noun a syntactic syntagma; others identify the article with the morpheme-like element which builds up with the noun stem a specific morpheme.

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].

Professor M. Blokh 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 categorial 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 [4, p. 72].

As a result, 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.

The invariant 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 English articles are multifunctional and polysemantic.

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 long 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?*

3. Before sharing some information about the object, we need to introduce it to the hearer, thus revealing the introductory 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 into the indefinite article is related to its origin from 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* [1].

The definite article presupposes **identification, definition, individualization.**

1. Identification is revealed when the speaker points out to 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* [1].

4. In most cases the zero article has the same semantics as the indefinite one. Still there are situations where the zero article is used with its specific meaning. With the zero article the noun loses its general lexico-grammatical meaning of "thingness" to a certain degree and acquires the meaning of "qualitativeness". For example, the nouns *day* and *night* used with the zero article stand for *light* and *darkness* rather than time units. Moreover, a greater degree of generalization of the zero article may be proved by a substitution testing, in which such combination as *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* [1].

In discussing the role of the articles it is essential to distinguish between specific, or particular, reference and generic reference. *The tiger is dying* (specific reference) and *The tiger is in danger of dying out* (generic reference). This is proper to all three articles, compare: *I saw a film* and *Only a film can amuse him, Cats were fighting* and *Cats like milk.*

The semantic distinctions, which are important for countable nouns with specific reference, disappear with generic reference, thus admitting of any of the articles: *A telephone is useful. The telephone is useful. Telephones are useful.*

Another function 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.*

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 and zero articles are usually used as formal indicators 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, containing new information, which advances the communicative process, have the highest degree of communicative dynamism.

It is not a secret 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. Therefore, one of the ways to learn how to use articles correctly is developing the necessary communicative skills through countless repetitions, which can only be achieved in a corresponding language environment. Another way is trying to develop a system of rules governing the use of articles in the language by understanding the basic principles of their functioning. Both methods should complement one another. A language student needs both theory and practice.

References

1. Volkova, L. M. Lectures in Theoretical Grammar [Electronic resource] / L. M. Volkova. – Mode of access: http://e-lingvo.net/library_view_6419_1.html. – Date of access: 30.10.2014.
2. Арутюнова, Н. Д. Лингвистические проблемы референции / Н. Д. Арутюнова // Новое в зарубежной лингвистике. – М. : Радуга, 1982. – Вып. XIII. – С. 5–41.
3. Блох, М. Я. Практикум по теоретической грамматике английского языка : учеб. пособие для студентов, обучающихся по направлению подготовки дипломированных специалистов «Лингвистика и межкультурная коммуникация» / М. Я. Блох, Т. Н. Семенова, С. В. Тимофеева. – 2-е изд., испр. – М. : Высшая школа, 2007. – 471 с.
4. Блох, М. Я. Теоретическая грамматика английского языка : учебник для вузов / М. Я. Блох. – 3-е изд., испр. – М. : Высшая школа, 2000. – 352 с.
5. Чирко, Т. М. Значения определенности / неопределенности и функции определений / Т. М. Чирко // Коммуникативный аспект взаимодействия формы и содержания языковых единиц. – Воронеж, 1991. – С. 98–107.