

# English articles — their distribution and function (Week 05)

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## 1 What are articles?

- Articles are linguistic items that are found inside noun phrases. Observe the following noun phrases. The articles are marked out in bold.
  - (1) Some of **the** apples
  - (2) **A** laddoo made of wheat
  - (3) **The** best tea in the country
  - (4) Many of **the** children
  - (5) **An** ant that I saw on the ground
- Not all languages have articles. This does not however mean that languages that lack articles do not have any other way to express the function that articles perform.
  - Think about how you would say (1)-(5) in your language. Does your language have articles?

## 2 Listening to Lingthusiasm

- Listen to the episode “This, that and the other thing - Determiners” on the *Lingthusiasm* podcast from 2:29 onwards [Note: Articles are a subset of determiners].
  - What is the example the podcasters discuss to explain the difference between ‘a’ and ‘the’?
  - How would you talk about this example in your language?

## 3 The distribution of the English articles

### 3.1 The distribution of ‘a/an’ and ‘the’

- The distribution of articles — which article is permitted where — is determined by properties of the nominal it occurs in front of.
  - For example, in (2) ‘a’ is permitted in front of the noun ‘laddoo’ because laddoo can be counted (one laddoo, two laddoos etc.) and is single in number i.e. a singular. ‘the’ would be permissible too.
  - However, if the noun were ‘laddoos’, ‘the’ is permissible while ‘a’ is not. This is because while ‘the’ shares with ‘a’ the property of being permitted in front of countable singular nouns, it has other distributions too.
  - ‘the’ can occur in front of countable plurals [see (4)] and even uncountables (mass nouns), like ‘sugar’ and ‘joy’.
  - In short, if a noun is plural or mass, ‘a/an’ is disallowed from occurring in front of it.

### 3.2 The distribution of the null or 'zero' article

- The null or 'zero' article is the absence of an article. The absence of an article too indicates a certain function.
- The null or 'zero' article is used to mark plural nouns and mass nouns and is disallowed with singular count nouns. **This means that it is obligatory to mark a singular count noun with either 'a' or 'the', depending on the context in question.**

	Count		Mass
	SG	PL	
null	*Give me raisin	Give me raisins	Give me milk
a/an	Give me a raisin	*Give me a raisins	*Give me a milk
the	Give me the raisin	Give me the raisins	Give me the milk

Figure 1: Distribution of English articles. The '\*' implies that that option is disallowed by the language

## 4 Articles are used to indicate familiarity, maximality or genericity

### 4.1 Familiarity

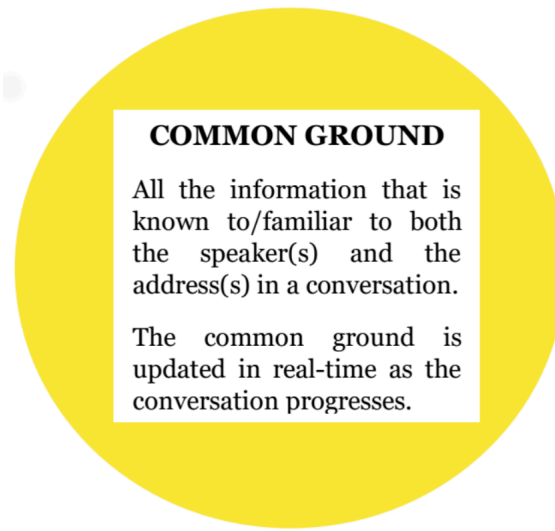


Figure 2: The common ground of a discourse is what all parties in the conversation are familiar with

- Consider (6) and (7).
  - (6) There was a litmus paper in the laboratory. #A litmus paper was damaged.
  - (7) There was a litmus paper in the laboratory. The litmus paper was damaged.
    - In (7), the speaker has familiarized the addressee(s) with information about the existence of some litmus paper. Now to further talk about the litmus paper, she would have to be referred to using the familiarity-marking article 'the'. The article 'a' can no longer be used to refer to this litmus paper, which is why (6) is odd.
- If 'a' is used, it can only refer either to litmus papers in general i.e. 'generically' [as in (8)], or to another litmus paper not yet introduced in the conversation or 'discourse' [as in (9)].

- (8) There was a litmus paper in the laboratory. A litmus paper usually turns blue or red but this one turned pitch-black.
- (9) There was a litmus paper in the laboratory. A litmus paper was also kept in the classroom.

	A / AN	THE
1,2	The only thing you can take into the examination tomorrow is <b>a dictionary</b> .	The only thing you can take into the examination is a dictionary. <b>The dictionary</b> you choose can either be mono- or bi-lingual.
1,2	This paper presents <b>a new system</b> for modeling 4D maps.	This paper presents a new system for modeling 4D maps. <b>The system</b> is based on ...
1,2	I don't have <b>a computer</b> at home.	I have a computer at home and at work. <b>The computer</b> that I have in my office is a Mac and the one at home is an HP.
1,2	ABSTRACT In this work, we make <b>an attempt</b> to test the efficiency of ...	RESULTS <b>In this work, the attempt to</b> assess the relative efficiency of the tested methods was carried out on two levels.
3	<b>A comparison</b> of our data with those in the literature indicates that ...	<b>The comparison</b> given in Sect. 2.1 highlights that ...
3	We are now in <b>a position</b> to apply Theorem 13.	The diagram indicates <b>the position</b> of each piece of equipment.
3	Contrary to what is currently thought, there is <b>a growing demand</b> for experts in this field.	We need to satisfy <b>the growing demand</b> for experts in this field, which looks set to increase even further.
3	This is <b>a first step</b> towards combatting terrorism in that area. We cannot be sure of the outcome ...	This is <b>the first step</b> towards combatting terrorism in that area. The second step is to ...

Figure 3: Usage of 'the' for the familiar

## 4.2 Maximality or Exhaustivity or "Whole, Not Part"

- noun phrases with 'the' refer to a set such that it is the maximal entity of things which fit the noun phrase's descriptive content.

- (10) The sun rises in the East. (There is only one 'sun')
- (11) The son of the empress died at battle. (The empress has only one son.)
- (12) The dodo is extinct. (Reference to a species i.e. all members.)
- (13) I know there are 3 red and 4 green apples on the table. Give me the red ones. (Reference to all the red apples i.e. 3, and not some of them).

YES	NO
<b>The aim of this document is to prove ...</b>	<b>Aim of this document is ...</b>
Our aim	
<b>The computers that are used in our department are all Hewlett Packard, and the software that we use is all proprietary software.</b>	<b>Computers used in our department are all Hewlett Packard, and software that we use is all proprietary software.</b>
Our computers and software	
<b>The government have increased taxes.</b>	<b>Government have increased taxes.</b>
The government of our country	
<b>As reviewed in the literature ...</b>	<b>As reviewed in literature ...</b>
The literature in our field	
<b>All the samples were cleaned in the laboratory.</b>	<b>All the samples were cleaned in laboratory.</b>
The lab in our institute	
<b>The results of the present study show ...</b>	<b>Results of the present study show ...</b>
Our results	

Figure 4: Using ‘the’ to mark the maximal

- You can see that ‘the’ encodes maximality by attempting to violate this property [see (14)]. (14) is odd because the sentence implies that a unique entity, ‘litmus paper’, is simultaneously red and blue. ‘the’ in front of the word ‘litmus paper’ means that there is a unique (maximal) litmus paper, and the same litmus paper, both doing some action V and not doing V is a contradiction.

(14) #The litmus paper has turned red and the litmus paper has turned blue.

- ‘a’ does not encode maximality. Rather ‘a’ just picks out some entity from the domain. ‘the’, as we have seen, takes a set of entities and returns the unique maximal entity in that set. This is why replacing ‘the’ with ‘a’ in (14) repairs the sentence — see (15).

(15) A litmus paper has turned red and a litmus paper has turned blue. (There exist more than one litmus paper.)

### 4.3 Genericity

- Sometimes noun phrases in sentences can cause the sentence to express a generalization. In English, generic reference can be effected by the use of three types of noun phrases.

1. ‘the’ marked singulars

(16) The polar bear is a bear

2. ‘a’ marked singulars

(17) A polar bear is a bear

### 3. zero article plurals

(18) Polar bears are bears.

- ‘the’ marked plurals cannot generate generic readings. This means that (19) refers to some salient polar bears (say, the ones in Eastern Greenland) in the world, declaring them to be bears. This (19) cannot necessarily be a statement about polar bears in general.

(19) #The polar bears are bears. (Does not mean that polar bears are, in general, bears.)

- Zero article singular count nouns are ungrammatical in English, and cannot, by default, refer to the generic.

1	<b>The life of a peasant</b> in the Middle Ages was hard.	<b>Life</b> in the Middle Ages was hard.
1	<b>The history of English</b> is fascinating.	<b>History</b> was my favorite subject at school.
2	<b>The problems that we've been having</b> with our English pronunciation are very serious.	<b>Problems</b> when learning English are very common.
2	<b>The wheat</b> used in some types of food is derived from ...	Studies were carried out on <b>wheat</b> .
2	<b>The hydrochloric acid</b> employed in our studies was purchased from ...	<b>Hydrochloric acid</b> is twelve times more active than sulfuric acid.
3	This is <b>the worst</b> paper in the collection	<b>Poorly written manuscripts</b> are very common.
4	<b>The main differences</b> are: X, Y and Z.	<b>Differences</b> in opinions on this subject are very common.
5,2	<b>The red wine that we had</b> last night.	I prefer <b>dark red wine from Chianti</b> to sparkling white wine from Asti.
5,2	<b>The intelligent female Ph.D. students</b> from non-European countries who have studied English <b>that have attended</b> my course tend to get better results than ...	Intelligent female Ph.D. students from non-European countries who have studied English tend to get better results than ...

Figure 5: Using ‘the’ to mark the maximal/unique and the generic

## 5 Errors in article usage

A type of error that users of English in our part of the world make is to use the zero/null article to encode the maximal/unique [see (20)] or the familiar [see (21)].

- (20) a. **Government** is quite dictatorial these days.  
b. **The government** is quite dictatorial these days.
- (21) a. For the purposes of the experiment, 14 pictures depicting scenes of violence were generated using AI. One group was not shown **pictures**.  
b. For the purposes of the experiment, 14 pictures depicting scenes of violence were generated using AI. One group was not shown **the pictures**.

A / AN		THE
1, 2	<b>A camel</b> (= <i>any camel</i> ) can go for days or even months without water because, unlike other animals, camels retain urea and do not start sweating until their body temperatures.	<b>The panda</b> (= <i>all the pandas in the world</i> ) is in danger of becoming extinct.
3, 4	<b>A computer</b> is an electronic device for storing and processing data.	<b>The computer</b> has changed the way we live.

Figure 6: Generic ‘a’ and generic ‘the’

## 6 A note on ‘a’ vs ‘an’

- Unlike the distribution of a, the and the zero article, the distribution of ‘a’ and ‘an’ has nothing to do with meaning. Their distribution is determined solely by the following phonological environment i.e. by the sound with which the word after them begins.
- When a noun begins with a consonant sound, as in /l/ in ‘lemons’ or /j/ in ‘university’, only ‘a’ is permitted.
- When a noun begins with a vowel sound, as in /aɪ/ in the letter ‘I’ or /əu/ in word ‘ozone’, only ‘an’ is permitted.

## 7 Article checking tool

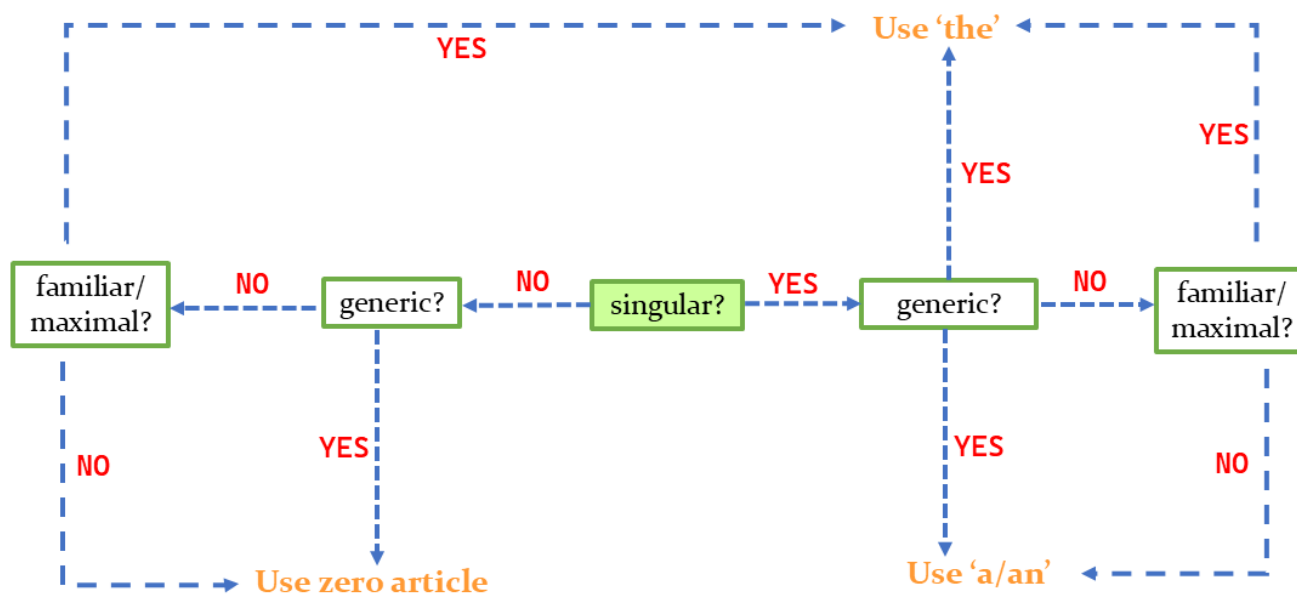


Figure 7: Use this tool to check if you have the correct article in front of your nouns. Start by asking if the noun is singular or not. Proceed to ask if it is generic, and then if it is familiar, or maximal

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