

An Analytic Interpretation of Grammatical Phrases Construing the English Articles

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Abstract: This paper studies the English article system from the perspective of dialectics. The aim of the study is to expand the area of understanding the English article system by showing that at the very elementary communicative level is more relevantly indicated as a relational dialectical system rather than a simple binary one as characterized in most traditional pedagogical grammar books. This research attempts to reach this objective by interpreting such key metalinguistic notions as anaphoric generic uniqueness etc as well as the three main descriptors of the English articles which involve article definite and indefinite. For Plato dialogues or our Daily communicational acts are fundamentally dialectical. Thus the base reasoning for his research is that if we understand the Notion linked to dialectic or dialectical acts better this will in turn help us comprehend our own dialogical acts in general and the English articles as a key dialogical marker in particular.

Key Words: English articles, dialectic, definiteness, indefiniteness

Introduction

The English articles *the* and *a/an* are most often used grammatical elements but are also salient as one of the most problematic areas in acquiring this language as a foreign language (Butler, 1999). A number of studies attempt have been made hoping to clarify what aspects of the English article system make the learner of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) have difficulty acquiring the system (Master, 1990; Song & Park, 2001). The goal of this research has been produced out of this line of pedagogical thought. The paper aims to extend the scope of understanding the English article system by demonstrating that at the very elementary communicative level it is more appropriately characterized as a relational dialectical system rather than a simple binary one as described in most traditional pedagogical grammar books. Specifically, this study attempts to reach this goal by re-interpreting key metalinguistic notions of the English articles which have been commonly used in the literature involving English grammar and linguistics.

This will be done from the perspective of the semantics of dialectics. By nature, this study is more likely to pursue what Ellis (1997) calls practical knowledge as opposed to technical knowledge. As part of the discussion about the Professional relationship between Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research and language pedagogy, he characterizes the former as explicit while the latter as implicit. What he argues with the technical knowledge which is obtained primarily by analytical and empirical work. On the other hand, practicing professionals like doctors and teachers tend to rely more on the practical knowledge which is intuitive and experiential.

In what follows, I will first briefly discuss in what respects this instrumental Notion of dialectic or dialectical help extend the scope of our understanding the English articles. A few key descriptions such as article, definite, indefinite and the like will then be analyzed.

On Dialectic

How has the notion dialectic or dialectical been defined in the literature? As Watson (1985 p 85) points out. Its origin seems to date back to Plato's period. Dialectic is Plato's Word coming from "dialegethai" to talk with and his works take the form of dialogues. As such the terms dialectic and dialogue are closely interrelated concepts. Here the implication is that our daily communicational act is fundamentally dialectical, so if we understand this notion better. This will in turn help us understand our own dialogical acts in general and the English articles as a key dialogical marker in particular.

What follows are brief schematic descriptions of these terms. Which have been drawn selectively from the Webster's Third New International Dictionary (1967). The nominal forms dialectic and dialectics are defined in two respects. In one sense, they are often identified as the theory and practice of weighing and reconciling

juxtaposed or contradictory arguments for the purpose of arriving at truth –especially through discussion and debate. In another sense, and particularly on literature, they are often referred to as a type of systematic reasoning that seeks to resolve a conflict. While both senses indicate a reality of tension or opposition between two interacting forces or elements their ultimate purpose is directed toward obtaining truth and solving problems through transforming or transcending.

Dialectics for Plato was used as a means of logical analysis or division of things and was expressed in the form of representing both “genera” (or Form in his view of universe) and species (or particular) (Stevenson. 1987). In Aristotle, dialectics was viewed as a method of arguing the different sides of any given problem. It was also used as an art intermediate between rhetoric (thus, more symbolic, indefinite inclusive generic metaphoric and less referential) and strict demonstration (thus more concrete or referential, specific, definite, and exclusive).

In the Kantian tradition, dialectics is used to account for paradoxical realities (i.e. both appearances and illusions), and it thus deals with paralogsms (i.e. reasoning contrary to the rules of logic), antinomies and transcendental ideas. Dialectics in this tradition becomes meaningful where these antithetical problems arise through logical fallacies, perceptual errors or the endeavor to use the principles of the understanding applicable only within experience for determination of such transcendental objects as the soul, the world and God.

In a slightly more developed form the Hegelian interpretation is spelled out as:

- a logical development progressing from less to more comprehensive levels that on its subjective side is the passage of thought from a thesis through an antithesis to a synthesis that in turn becomes a thesis for further progressions ultimately culminating on the absolute idea and on its objective side is an analogous development in the process of history and the cosmos. (Webster’s Dictionary.1967.p 623)

It is noteworthy that historically up to Hegel’s use of dialectics. Its major function was the acquisition of truth and resolution of conflicts in problems. For Marx in contrast, the dialectic is viewed more as a conceptual tool responsible for bringing about some change or transformation. He expressed this Notion as:

- the process of self-development or unfolding (as of an action, event, ideology, movement or institution) through the stages of thesis, antithesis and synthesis in accordance with the laws of dialectical materialism and the method that regards change in nature and history as taking place in this way. (Webster’s Dictionary. 1967.p.623)

For him reality is a changing process to be decoded by the human mind.

The adjectival forms dialectic and dialectical are typically represented with the following characteristic semantic features. They are (a) marked by a dynamic inner tension, conflict and interconnectedness of parts of elements: (b) they are used to denote the idea of mutuality and reciprocity: (c) they are used to refer to the acts of practicing, being devoted to, or employing a dialectic and (d) as regarding something from the point of view of a dialectic.

In summary the dialectic has been used as a conceptual catch-all to account for various paradoxical and co-existing aspects inherent in human reasoning and practices. Dialectics has been as both theory and practice as indicating a solution, recognition or acknowledgement of conflict contradiction, oxymoron and the like. This use of dialectics is responsible for denoting involves the recognition of change, difference, distinction, and the like over time.

In fact because of its potential utility in constructing social theory the concept of dialectics has been given increased attention by psychologists (Gusfield, 1989: Georgoudi, 1984: Perin-banayagam, 1991). In reviewing many of the social psychological studies on this subject, Georgoudi (1984) concludes that dialectics has been employed not just at the level of theory construction but also at a metatheoretical level and at the level of methodological application. He has also noted that dialectics. In its most general sense is viewed as a process of relating nearly all aspects of human activity. Thus it is a form of mediation with a wide range of applications and nearly unlimited theoretical and practical potential. In other words, its unstated implications are widely and systematically disturbed to almost all sectors of the human and social sciences.

As briefly illustrated above, the implications of the term dialectic are profound in terms of their philosophical, psychological and methodological applications. Let me point out in what sense the notion of dialectic can be helpful for one to understand the English article system, particularly from a pedagogical standpoint. First as seen in Plato’s view of dialectic the English articles signify both generic or specific meaning and the articles are obviously key dialogical devices. Thus the system reflects the contradictory nature of relation between a whole and its part as well as the processual nature of our human praxis or action. Second similarly to the dialectic as a theoretical concept the semantic root of the English article connotes “relation” which will be

discussed further later in this paper. Third just as the notion of dialectic entails system has an antithetical structure (i.e. definite and indefinite) The system is used for meaning differentiation and construction in dialogical context In sum it seems obvious that there exists a certain conceptual parallel between what we have seen about dialectic and the English articles.

Key Descriptions of the Articles

Let me start with the three basic descriptors of the English articles which involve “definite” “indefinite” and article. These terms have been commonly attributed and related to the usage of the articles “the” and “a/an”. Although commonly used these three descriptors have not sustained a rigorous theoretical analysis by EFL/ESL researchers. Typically these researchers have simply followed the lead of many earlier theorists. Both philosophers and linguists who from a very different set of assumptions in the philosophy of science have usually resorted to using them as simple referring devices for “the” and “a/an”.

For instance Russell a leading philosopher of the logical positivist school²⁸ is a typical case in point. As cited by Rosenberg and Travis (1971, p.167), Russell (1973) used these terms to distinguish different modes of philosophical description:

- A “description” may be of two sorts definite and indefinite (or ambiguous). An indefinite description is a phrase of the form “a so-and-so,” and a definite description is a phrase of the form “the” so-and-so (in the singular), (original emphasis)

A similar but more specific usage of these terms has been proposed by Bickerton (1985):

- In English “definite” really means presumed known to the listener whether by prior knowledge (the man you met yesterday) uniqueness in the universe (the sun is setting) uniqueness in a given setting (The battery is dead-cars do not usually have more than one battery) or general knowledge that a named class exists (The dog is the friend of man): and “indefinite” really means presumed unknown to the listener whether by absence of prior knowledge (A man you should meet is Mr. Blank) nonexistence of a nameable referent (Bill is looking for a wife) or nonexistence of any referent (George couldn’t see an aardvark) (p.147)

Accordingly, authors of English grammar books usually use these notions as received categories. They assume the word “the” is responsible for definiteness and the words “a/an” are responsible based on simple clear and straightforward categorical meanings, it has had a broad pedagogical appeal. However because of its theoretical simplicity this classification has also been problematic and misleading to many students. The fact is that “the, a/an” or no use of these words is found in the same or a similar communicative context without a substantial difference in meaning (e.g. the tiger, a tiger, and tigers). This could thus lead one to confusion about what it means to be definite and indefinite. A separate descriptive analysis of these terms will, I believe, show that a more relational meaning of these articles is warranted.

Article

The term “article” is probably the most common descriptor used in reference to the words “the” and “a/an” and is used either when referring separately to one or the other of these articles or to both as a common category of grammatical elements A clue to the meaning of this term may be found by looking into its historical origins its ancestral forms found both in Greek and Latin, are *arthron* and *articulus*, respectively. They are said to be no more than the ordinary words for link or joint (Lyons, 1977) and appear to be analogous to relation or connection.

Note also that in the early Greek language no sharp distinction was drawn in terms of the forms or syntactic and semantic functions between demonstrative pronouns the definite and indefinite articles and the relative pronouns. As Herndon (1976, p.10) states, the term “*syndesmoi*” was at first applied to them all, and it was chosen, presumably, because they were all regarded as connectives of various kinds. The primary function of these various words is based on notions of linking, connecting, and other relating schema.²⁹

²⁸ From Bertrand Russell, (1919). Introduction to mathematical philosophy. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd. Chapters X and XI, pp.167-180.

²⁹ For a full discussion of the theoretical differences between these usages, see Hawkins (1978), where he makes specific analyses from a particular theoretical linguistic viewpoint.

These relational concepts are virtually all time-bound in that relating one thing with another requires time: namely a diachronic relation. Note also that the verb form “articulate” is related to the notion “article” in a morphological sense. From this we can further speculate that the use of the articles as an act of articulation or saying is itself an act of relating in a dialogical sense.

The Definite

When turning our attention to the notion of definite we are initially led to question why this adjective is prefixed to the noun article (i.e. as the name of “the” which is an arbitrary array of written signs or that of aural markings) and is used together as in the definite article. A basic level of understanding this relation may, however, already be found in some of our usual dictionary meanings of this term. Some of these meanings include: (a) exact limits: (b) precision and clarity in meaning: (c) explicitness and certainty: (d) limitation and specificity. From these lexical entries one can sense that the meaning of “definite” is assumed to be something obvious and self-evident which implies a type of confinement or a line-drawing and conversely excludes something vague and unintelligible.

This dictionary definition informs us that things or phenomena can be ontologically absolute while at the same time remaining somewhat less defined. In fact, for us to be definite about something (or to define something clearly) has been a central part of our knowledge what is definable through reasoning becomes the source of knowledge as the definite or absolute Truth. He symbolized the truth with the concept “Forms” in the sense that they are “more real than material thing for they do not change or decay” (Stevenson 1987, p.29). More specifically in relation to the referential function of a word (i.e. a word used to refer to truly many different individual referents). Plato thought that corresponding to each usage of the word there is one Form, which makes the particular individual referents meaningful entries in terms of its idealistic formal or symbolic resemblance to the referents.

This formal and universal resemblance connotes the characterization of a class of certain entities by a process of objective definition. Moreover, for Plato, “only this intellectual acquaintance with the “Forms” can really count as knowledge since only what fully exists can be fully known” (Stevenson 1987, p.29). In relation to a common interpretation of Plato, Hergenhahn notes that:

- Before being placed in the body at birth the soul dwells in pure and complete knowledge. Thus, all human souls know everything before entering the body. Upon entering the body the knowledge of soul begins to be contaminated by sensory information (198,3 p.34)

This implies that if humans naively accept what they experience through the senses they are doomed to live a life of opinion and ignorance. For this reason Plato’s concern was with reaching an idealistic state of “Forms” responsible for uncontaminated human mind and society through education. In this regard, the most convincing illustration of his theory of Forms comes from the Euclidean geometry, which Stevenson has described as follows:

- Consider how it deals with lines circles and squares but may always have some irregularity. Theorems concerning these ideal objects-straight lines without thickness perfect circle et-are proved with absolute certainty by logical arguments. Here we have indubitable knowledge of timeless objects which are the patterns that material objects imperfectly resemble (1978, p.29)

In light of this, one can think about the geometrical concept of point, which in a perceptual sense is thought of as standing in its own right, but which is in fact a meaningful construct only if related to other geometrical notions like line. Its understanding requires formal conceptualization. Plato’s conception of idealistic knowledge has to do with this kind of geometrical definition of knowledge that he indefinable (thus indefinite and perceptually contaminated) point in its own ontogenesis becomes definable (thus definite) only in relation to its totality the line. It is in the process of becoming definable that things become definite for us. In fact Plato’s conception of knowledge is typically dialectic.

Thus, following Plato’s, we become both knowledgeable and ignorant by having a means to define it is very improbable to speak of a “definite point” as found in a geometrical sense. When we see a given point on a geometrical plain, it may be viewed as having its own definite and obvious confinement but it is clear that this is not the case because a point in its own right is theoretically impossible. In the mathematical word (e.g. the

Möbius strip, numerical entities divided by zero, etc.) the matter of definition is similarly not posited as an absolute and separate notion.

This does not mean however that our acts of defining are always meaningless but that the definite becomes meaningful only in relation. What appears as definite does not necessarily make it so and the term definite with its dictionary significance is plausible only when the usage presupposes an indefinitely-given or taken-for-granted condition. In effect this term must be seen in essence to presume an indefinitely-given as well as a totality against which our acts of defining limiting confining specifying identifying and idealizing occur. Thus even at a very general definitional level our uses of “definite” and “indefinite” are essentially relational and dialectic.

When judged from only dictionary meanings, the concept of exclusiveness may be seen as semantically analogous to definiteness. However, Hawkins (1978), in an apparent reversal, has characterized the grammatical role of the definite article as inclusiveness and that of the indefinite article as exclusiveness on the basis of his semantic and pragmatic analysis. His argument for the grammaticality of the definite and indefinite article, based on pragmatic premises, is probably quite appropriate in the context of his analytical and philosophical approach. But based on the two apparently opposing definitions we might infer that things or phenomena can be thought of as both ontologically absolute and not so at the same time in that the definite or the absolute connotes both exclusion (by the criteria of its lexical meanings) and inclusion (by the criteria of Hawkins’ linguistic analysis). Here again, one cannot ignore the dialectic.

The Indefinite

With the notion “indefinite” one may also question why the adjective attaches itself so naturally to the noun article (i.e. as the name of “a/an”) when they are used together like indefinite article. The lexical entries for this term involve (a) Having no exact limits or having no limits at all (B) not precise sharp and clear in meaning and outline vague: (c) not sure or positive inexplicit and uncertain and (d) not limiting and specifying not referring to the specific. Given that all these descriptions imply no exclusion a prototype meaning of indefiniteness may be said to be that of “inclusiveness”. As stated earlier this is contradistinctive to Hawkins’s (1978) generalization about the grammatical function of the indefinite articles in terms of “exclusiveness”. This apparent contradictory nature of the English articles as related to their mate languages may be a partial explanation for many non-native speakers’ difficulty and confusion in mastering them.

The fundamental meanings of these attributive adjectives presuppose the postponement or reservation of the act of defining. They are also suggestive of a certain contingency which requires further action. Having no limits implies that, whatever it means the meaning is to be open. This openness to contingency gives rise to the question of motive, potential and intention to be defined, or on its way to becoming definite. All in all, the “indefinite” as a concept can be viewed as reflecting a mental state or process which has not been fully acted out, but is ready to be acted out. Because it is paradigmatically open it in some sense signifies a syntagmatic (or simply temporal) induction and foretells a sense of meaning-making or of becoming definite.

Other Metalanguages of the Articles

What follows is an attempt to reinterpret some descriptive terms that have commonly been used in analyzing English articles usages. There are quite a number of “classificatory notions” which are reflected in our common usages of the articles and which form another major class of metalanguages about the English articles. Some of these most commonly used notions which are used to describe our various communicative functions of the English articles include the following: (a) deictic or demonstrative use: (b) back-pointing or anaphoric use: (c) forward-pointing or cataphoric: (d) uniqueness: (e) communal sharing: (f) generic and specific: and (g) endophora or in-text reference and exphora or out-text reference.

It should be noted at the outset that a general and common feature of all these categories can be described as ‘the communicative act of pointing.’ The key feature of the articles has generally been interpreted as being dualistic and mutually exclusive. This has been the case, I contend, because our treatment of the grammatical aspects of the articles has usually been restricted to a within-sentence analysis. In order to have been better understanding about the articles, I feel that we need to extend to scope of analysis to the much broader context of communicative act. What follows is thus discussed from a communicative perspective which involves all forms of human actions reflecting one’s psycho-social-cultural history.

Deictic

The notion of ‘deictic’ along with its etymological link with ‘deixis’ is analogous to the philosophical notion of indexical expression (Crystal, 1986). And its literal meaning is pointing or indication. It should be noted that a major function of the definite article has been understood as revealing an indicative or determining role, not unlike that of deixis. Lyons (1977) states that deixis refers to the variety of grammatical and lexical features “which relate utterance” (p. 636). Here note that the essential features of deixis are also defined as relational: in other words at the level of identifying which is linked to which the relational act must have a context in order to make sense. This act necessarily involves both “agency” (i.e. who relates) and “object” (e.g. enactive, iconic, or symbolic) we are to relate and thereby implies that a relational act arises from within an instrumental context.

From this interpretation of the term ‘deixis’ one is able to derive at least two meanings namely what is pointing as inner motive—the pointer or intention and what is being pointed to—outer evidence or actualization of pointing. The nature of indication itself is not a simple mechanical pointing behavior but is a relational, intentional and psychological gesture mediating between pointer and pointee. It is this dual reality of a pointing act that, I contend, can be characterized as being dialectical and dialogical. More specifically we may say that deixis entails a double dialectic: a relation between intention and a deictic sign: and a relation between the sign and its referent in actual communication. In many cases of human communication the second relation turns out to be reflexive in that the referent itself is language. In this sense language is our existential reference.

“Deixis” involves not only the characteristic feature of the demonstrative pronouns, but also tense and person, and a number of other syntactically relevant features in the context-of-an utterance (Thavenius, 1983; Wilkins, 1985). According to Lyons (1977), it also refers to the philosophical notion of ostension or ostensive definition. It is worth noting that ostensive, deictic, and demonstrative are all based upon the idea of identification or drawing attention to something in a communicative space by pointing. So too is Hardwick’s (1977) term “indexical”, which has been employed in the recent philosophical literature roughly in the sense that we are assigning deictic to discursive acts (Lyons, 1977, p.637).

As such, the notion of deixis is understood as an indicative function which is conceptually similar to the acts of pointing, locating and identifying. Lyons accounts for the act of pointing as follows:

- The canonical situation-of-utterance is egocentric in the sense that the speaker by virtue of being the speaker casts himself in the role of ego and relates everything to his viewpoint. He is at the zero-point of the spatiotemporal co-ordinates of what is referred to as the deictic context (1977 p. 638)

What is insightful here is the use of the notion ‘zero-point’ because it is conceptually similar to the notion of indefinite. Specifically, it does not seem to be a mere co-occurrence that this egocentric sense of zeroness in one’s utterance is initiated with an indefinite expression such as ‘once upon “a” time, there lived “a” farmer in “a” village. It appears to indicate a speaker’s self-awareness of where he or she is located in a given discourse space. In other words, the speaker knows that the story should start from scratch or nothingness. Or the speaker is likely to assume that the hearer knows “nothing” about what he or she is going to talk about. Although it may sound speculative the phrase “zero-point” above seems to connote the meaning of nothing.

In addition as it is found in the earliest stage of a child’s cognitive development deixis, in terms of its attention drawing property, is the most rudimentary identifying act in a child’s communicative conduct. In summary English article usage when related to the metalinguistic notion of deixis, as with many others, reflects a dynamic and dialectical reality that is often missed when we treat the articles as simply either definite or indefinite.

Anaphoric

The notion of ‘anaphoric use’ or ‘back-pointing’ refers to the case where an entity in a narrative text which often occurs first with the indefinite article “a/an” is identified again in that text by replacing “a/an” with “the” to indicate its reappearance in the discourse. For instance in the sentence “Bill bought a TV and a radio, but he returned the radio” “the” in “the radio” is explained as revealing the anaphoric function.

What counts here is that the signification of ‘the’ is predicated on the precondition of “a”. In this context the use of “a” as an indefinite expression is viewed as a necessary condition for the latter use of “the”. In other words “the” becomes meaningful by virtue of “a”. Moreover their linguistic value becomes meaningful only when they are understood in temporal context because the notion of presupposition is a time-bound one. This anaphoric usage reflects the temporal coordination or history-sharing function which is so important between interlocutors in their broader mutual meaning-making and understanding processes. Accordingly here again it is

apparent that “a” and “the” are not really separate linguistic mechanisms or entities but are rather constitutive semantic poles forming an interactive whole between interlocutors. Moreover since this function can be expected to be acquired much later in conceptual and/or linguistic development than the simple deictic or indicative act.

Cataphoric

The “cataphoric” use or “forward-pointing use” of the articles is seen in the case where linguistic identity is established by the post-modification that follows the noun. For example it involves the use of “the” in the sentence “Bill returned the radio he bought yesterday” as well as in the sentence “The” olives of Turkey (or which Turkey produces) are the best in the world. Insofar as the fundamental meaning of the sentence retains its central intent or sense the first sentence can be interpreted as “Bill bought a radio, and he returned it or the radio.” As seen in each interpretation we can infer or presume that at least part of the meaning of “the” in the examples connotes the indefinite meaning which the indefinite article “a” yields.

The same reasoning which was developed in the discussion of the anaphoric function above seems to be at work here with the cataphoric function of the articles. What matters here is the matter of explicit observability or of implicit sharedness between interlocutors. While not directly observable what appears to be functioning is a certain dialectical interaction between the definite and the indefinite. The “the” in “Bill returned the radio he bought yesterday” may be thought of as only a grammatical choice but its significance derives from the recognition of the existential presupposition of “a” as connected in “Bill bought a radio yesterday.” Moreover, in a similar context, if Bill bought more than one radio, it would also be possible to say that “Bill returned “a” radio he bought yesterday.” Thus here again the definite and the indefinite meanings cannot simply be prefixed grammatical notions but are determined in actual communicative contexts, and choice for their usage seems to be determined mostly on dialogical grounds. In effect this dialectical schema of the articles is structured through various and processual dialogical experiences rather than the result of a simple instructional knowing of the meaning of the words and grammar rules.

Uniqueness

The notion of “uniqueness” refers to the definite usage where an object or a group of objects is interpreted as revealing, characteristically, oneness and wholeness at the same time: for instance, the stars, the earth, the world, the sea, the North Pole, the equator, the Reformation, the human race, etc. In other words, its significance arises where referents are understood to be unique in a given context: the sun, the moon, the kitchen, the car, etc. This notion indicates the existence of only one thing either as an individual entity or as a kind. The definite expression seen in this category may be indicated as presuming a native speaker’s ontological mental index regarding a specific referent. For instance, in the case of the earth, we may say that the passage indicates the native English speaker’s recognition that something as a referent exists which is named “earth” (i.e. the awareness of existential reality) and that the speaker learned to call it “the” earth as a conventional label to indicate a common awareness of the referent. In this schema, the use of “the” requires both a self and others: namely, without you as another, the use of “the” turns out to be meaningless. We learn in this way that the meaning of uniqueness and the related use of an article is conditioned (or becomes significant) by a speaker in the face of a hearer.

A native speaker’s competence in this aspect of language, as with other aspects appears as internalization and increasing awareness in the context of communicative socialization processes. Here again, considering traditional language learning settings, where one-way instruction has been preferred over actual communication it is understandable why it is so difficult for learners to develop this kind of social sense, and have so much difficulty with the articles. This social sense can be properly acquired only through actual dialogical (i.e. social) experiences, rather than in simple monological, instructional acts.

Situational/Communal Sharing

Compared to the uniqueness expression the notion of “situational or communal sharing” refers to article usage which is more adaptable to situational variations. The use of an article in this sense does not necessarily signify the uniqueness of the referent. The usual examples in this category are: the radio, the television and the telephone in a given social setting. In a similar way to what was discussed previously, I content that the expression, “the radio” becomes intelligible only when interlocutors either explicitly admit that there actually is a radio both as a thing and as a word (i.e. a classical reference problem). Hence, when one says “the radio” he or she presupposes the ontology of its referent as well as the existence of a meaningful symbol.

It should be noted, however that while this type of referential function is necessary in most communicative discourse acts. It is not sufficient. The referent which the noun phrase indicates is usually in a social context, and as such it is obvious that its referential reality varies from context to context. For instance, in the case of the phrase “ten minutes before “the” hour”, we all know that the noted temporal referent is relative to the assumed time referent of the hour. Whether we are talking about a physical referent or an imaginary referent it is clear that the definite expression is contingent upon the existential cognitive index, which is characteristically adaptable to input, but which retains certain indefinite properties.

Generic and Specific

The “generic” and “specific” usages of the English articles refer to Noun Phrases (NPs) preceded by “the”, “a/an” or “the zero” article so that each reveals either the genericity or the specificity of the nominal entity in a context. A generic expression refers to what is general or typical for a whole class of objects. In the sentence, “The tiger is a beautiful animal” it means that “the” indicates the class of tigers, and not simply one individual member of the class. This sentence is thus understood as expression essentially the same meaning as the following sentences: “Tigers are beautiful animals” on the one hand and “A tiger is a beautiful animal” on the other. Traditional English pedagogical grammar books usually describe such sentence as having a common property of genericity simply taking their formal or morphological differences for granted without any plausible explanation. Accordingly, they are understood the mean virtually the same thing. Moreover almost all informants of native English speakers cannot find any meaning difference among the three sentences above nor can they explain “why so?”

To recapitulate the generic expression represents the concept or idea which is generally attributable to certain entities pervading all members of a given class. As shown in the previous examples while the dialectical phenomenon is self-evident in this function of the English articles, questions have rarely been raised about what this kind of semantic contradiction means in language pedagogy. Thus, what seems to be necessary to be equipped with some meaningful ideas concerning how to explain it to the student?

In effect what I content here particularly in terms of seeing the article system as a dialectical relational system is that genericity as semantic representation of “the” NP, “a/an” NP and NPs is embodied along the line of semantic continuum between the definite and the indefinite. This in turn implies that “the” tends to appear along the definite end of this continuum and that “a/an” along that of the indefinite. Moreover NPs can then be viewed as a certain entity appearing somewhere in the middle. One may argue that seeing articles in this way is only speculative at most. But I would rather argue that this interpretive schema is meaningful in that it possibly offers a coherent way of explaining the varying nature of the English article usage both for the student and the teacher. The bottom line here is that until we have a better one, we should dig something out hoping that it’s better than nothing.

A specific expression in contrast represents the entities rather directly as seen in such sentences as “Look at the tiger” or “ask a boy in this group” and does so especially in the context where both interlocutors have specific knowledge about the referent. Hence, generally speaking, when representing a referent with its related NP, the generic expression reveals an indirect “symbolic reference” (i.e. the referent does not have to be real, and moreover the referents that the interlocutors may have in mind are not necessarily identical): a specific expression reveals a direct symbolic reference in that both the speaker and the hearer are required to experience a common shared meaning in conjunction with a given referent. Here again, under this re-interpreted theoretical schema. I content that the locus of linguistic control that determines either the genericity or specificity of meaning is not in the language terms (i.e. “the”, “a/an”, or “zero article”) but in the degree of referent sharing between interlocutors.

Endophora and Exophora

Two more theoretical terms which appear to capture the relational properties of the English articles but which are also often seen in the study of pronouns are known as “endophor” and “exophora”. According to Thavenus (1938)

- A speaker will use pronouns to refer in two ways: he can refer to something that is mentioned in the conversation and the reference is then textual or ‘endophoric’; or he can refer to something that has not been mentioned, but that can be retrieved from what can be perceived in the situational setting or from the speaker’s and listener’s shared knowledge and experience. (p. 140)

He calls the latter case an example of situational or exophoric reference. Halliday and Hasan similarly introduce the term endophoric “as a general name for reference within the text” (1976, p 33) but for them

endophoric covers both anaphoric and cataphoric reference (or forward-pointing) article uses, these two functional categories of English pronouns also manifest the relational nature of language use and modes of human thinking.

CONCLUSION

In order to isolate the dialectical aspects of the English article system study has attempted to reinterpret key metalinguistic terms concerning the system. I have tried to show that even at the grammatical level when viewed within the context of various metalanguages the articles are best seen as a relational and dialectical system. This dialectical system I content, can be seen as “a higher system” (just as in the structuralists’ world view) which controls the interactive processes (i.e both syntagmatic and paradigmatic forces or both mutually inclusive and exclusive). This higher system which may be represented as a symbolic sign of “(IN)DEFINITENESS,” suggest that it be viewed in the holistic, communicative, relational context rather than solely within a somewhat limited grammatical intra-sentential and word-centered one.

The rationale for my suggestion is not unlike our understanding that phonemic reality becomes more meaningful at the level of morphology and morphological reality at the level of syntax and so on. These ideas are illustrative of an understanding of our human language and communicative system as a multi-leveled and somewhat hierarchical meaning system in which the higher and more inclusive levels of meaning supersede, elaborate and constrain the lower and preceding ones. This mutually exclusive but at the same time co-deterministic characteristic is a very essential feature of human language system. This idea was recognized some years ago by the structural linguist Roman Jakobson (1968), who identified the human sound system in this matter.³⁰

Moreover this higher system is also indicative of our broader and more pervasive mental processes. One can find it not only in our language use but also in all of our psycho-social acts of meaning making. Although this argument requires much lengthy discussion. I wish to note briefly how our use of “the” which usually presupposes the existence of “a/an” can be seen as revealing a form of higher order metacognitive functioning. Specifically the use of one in relation to the other reflects our mode of metacognition (i.e. thinking about thinking) which presupposes a continuation of discourse and continuous meaning specification. This kind of metacognition is what makes text cohesion and coherence (i.e. meaning making and communication) possible in a given dialogical contest.

Bruner’s (1986) understanding of the semantics of human expressions while not explicitly stated in relation to the use of the English articles is conceptually congruent with the current argument:

- The relation of words or expressions to other words or expressions constitutes along with reference the sphere of meaning. Because reference rarely achieves the abstract punctiliousness, a “singular”, “definite referring expression” is always subject to “polysemy” and because there is no limit on the ways in which expressions can relate to one another, meaning is always undetermined ambiguous. To make sense in language as David Olson argued persuasively some years ago, always requires an “act of disambiguation.” (p. 64)

In effect, this act of disambiguation is a most fundamental metacognitive function that is inherent in our cognitive activities and involves the various processes of differentiation, identification, definition, determination, etc. The articles often called determiners or grammatical markers, by grammarians and linguists can thus also and more importantly be viewed as a dialectical and semantically coherent system of symbols which not only reflects our cognitive and communicative contexts but may serve the more active function of constructing meaning in these contexts.

³⁰ Roman Jakobson’s (1968) theory of phonology development is based on his distinctive feature analysis (or phonemic distinction in general) of the sound systems of many different languages. A central theme of the theory is that the pattern of phonological development is systematic in a relational sense.

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