A critical analysis of the use of English definite and indefinite articles in doctoral theses defended in the Department of English at Cheikh Anta DIOP University, Dakar, Senegal

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Abstract

This research deals with how the definite and indefinite articles (the and a/an) are used by French speaking researchers in their doctoral theses they have already defended in the Department of English at Cheikh Anta DIOP University. After having used documentary analysis in order to collect data from twenty (20) defended doctoral theses, this paper shows that the definite and indefinite articles are not properly used in some reference phrases. The two types of articles are either ungrammatically used or realized in the layered structure of the reference phrase to convey unintentional meanings that impinge upon the interpretation of sent information. This research shows the types of semantic modifications the appropriate use of the definite and indefinite articles makes in English reference phrases. It has been found that some reference phrases that are about specific referents in the outside world are realized without the definite article *the*, and others whose referents must be talked about generally are unintentionally modified by the use of the definite article. Zero article is used where the indefinite article must appear, and the definite article is used in reference phrases that contextually require the use of the indefinite article in order to convey appropriate information.

Keywords: Definite article, indefinite article, reference phrase, semantic modification, semantic interpretation, head noun, referent, layered structure

1. Introduction

The use of English articles seems to be among the grammatical points some French speaking learners and researchers have problems using properly. French and English have the same systems about the general use of articles, but some noticeable differences are found in how the two languages apply such operators to different contexts in the layered structure of the Reference Phrase (RP). Such differences may be the cause of some misuses of English articles on the part of people who have first got good groundings in French before they specialize in English they have been learning as a foreign language. In fact, whatever the context may be, the right use of English

articles should be paid careful attention in academic writing inasmuch as this plays a crucial role in terms of semantic contributions and interpretations. The occurrence of articles in the layered structure of the RP helps convey meaning that is different from that of their non-occurrence. English articles are reference phrase operators that are chiefly used to modify head nouns, which means that the referent of a head noun can be construed in different ways depending upon the type of modifier (article) such a head noun co-occurs with.

To give an overview of the types of articles that are used in English, Adamzewski and Gabilan (1992) state that English boasts three degrees of articles that are **Ø** (zero article), *a* (**an**), and *the*. They point out that French also has the same degrees as English, but there are some differences between the two languages as far as the use is concerned. In fact, Adamzewski and Gabilan's work would help better if it gave clear explanations about the very noticeable differences to which French speaking researchers should pay attention. In order that French speaking researchers become more aware of relevant semantic modifications the use of articles makes in the transmission of meaningful messages, they should understand in a very clear way the type of information each of the three degrees of English articles conveys.

Following Alexander (1988), there are three complicated factors one must clearly grasp if they want to use English articles properly. These factors are: "Whether a noun is countable or uncountable"; "Whether we are making general statements"; and "Whether we are referring to something the listener or reader can positively identify or not" (Alexander, 1988, p.56). In fact, taking into account each of the three aforementioned factors chiefly helps decide which article to use in order to make the right modification at the level of semantic interpretation. For instance, so far as the first factor is concerned, it is worth specifying that a speaker or writer's confusion of mass and count nouns can impinge upon the use of the right article. It is semantically paramount to use articles properly because when these are misused, either they cause ungrammaticality or the speaker/writer and the listener/reader do not have the same interpretation of the shared information. As such, for instance, if *An advice is grammatically incorrect, *Students* and *The students* do not have the same interpretation if one considers the semantic modification the definite article *The* is used to make.

Hewings (2005) points out that the definite article *the* is not used with plural and mass nouns to "talk generally, without definite people or things in mind" (p.94); it is zero article that is used instead. Hewings's statement indicates that when head nouns are used to refer to things or people in general in the outside world, they do not normally co-occur with the definite article *The*. Murphy (2004) also says something similar by writing that "When we are talking about things or people in general, we do *not* use **the**" (p. 150), we usually use no article instead. In doing so, for instance, a

reference phrase like *Freshmen* conveys semantic information according to which we are talking about all university students in the first year. Then, the reference phrase *Freshmen* cannot be construed as particular first year students, it must semantically be understood as general by both the sender and the receiver of the message. Such an interpretation is impossible, if *The* is used to modify the head noun *Freshmen*.

In order to better understand the appropriate use of the definite article *The*, first, it is paramount to bear in mind a certain number of general rules. In this sense, Biber et al. (1999) demonstrate that *The* is used with both mass and count nouns to specify that "the referent of the noun phrase is assumed to be known to the speaker and the addressee" (p. 263). Murphy (2004) states that "We use **the** when it is clear in the situation which thing or person we mean" (p. 144). Murphy (2004) goes on saying that *The* is also used "when there is only one of something" as is exemplified in reference phrases like "The world", "The sun", "The moon", and "The earth" (p. 146). Eckersley and Eckersley (1960) go in the same sense by stating that *The* is used to express the meaning "the only one"; this amounts to saying that English uses *The* to signal that there is only one of something. It is grammatically understandable to specify these kinds of nouns inasmuch as both the speaker/writer and the listener/reader know what their referents are in the outside world. Producing utterances like *World is big*, *Sun is shining*, *Moon shines in sky at night* causes a semantic problem that can be solved by the occurrence of the article *The*. In *The world is big*, the reference phrase *The world* makes us think of the only *world* we know; it is then specific and shared information.

Grammarians have shown cases in which the definite article *The* is not normally used. When a reference phrase is composed of *noun + number*, the definite article *the* does not occur (Murphy, 2004). In such a case, the non-occurrence of the definite article *The* is explained by the fact that the number that is used to modify the head noun helps identify its referent in the outside world. For example, there is no doubt that if a speaker utters a reference phrase like *Group 1*, they refer to something the listener or the receiver can recognize in the outside world among other possible groups. As such, it is then ungrammatical to define the head noun by using *The* and a number at once; *The group 1* is ungrammatical. *The* is not used in a reference phrase that consists of a *title + a proper noun* (Murphy, 2004) either. This is the case in examples like *President Wade* and *Professor Faye;* since the head nouns in such types of reference phrases are defined or known by both the sender and the receiver of the message, there is no need to use *The* to express definiteness.

The definite article *The* is not normally used in reference phrases headed by nouns such as *university, hospital, church, prison*, etc., when the speaker thinks of "the general idea of these places and what they are used for" (Murphy, 2004, p.148). This is understandable insofar as there

is a general rule that puts that *The* is not normally used when the speaker talks about things or people in general. With the aforementioned head nouns, it is relevant to take into account the idea of generality and function because they can also co-occur with *The* when the speaker has in mind a particular institution. In this manner, the reference phrases *hospital* in *He is in hospital,* and *the hospital* in *I arrived at the hospital* do not semantically signal the same information. If the names of meals also are used in reference phrases to refer to something in general, the definite article does not occur (Eckersley and Eckersley, 1960); some examples are *breakfast, dinner, lunch*, etc. Like the first group of nouns that have been given as examples, these nouns also can be modified by *The* when referring to particular meals.

In English, if the speaker wants to "make generalization about a species", they can use the indefinite article *The* before "a singular countable noun" (Murphy, 2004). In doing so, they do not think of the referent of the used noun as something particular, but as something representing a type in general. For example, by saying that *The dog is a nice animal*, the speaker is not referring to a specific *dog* among other dogs, but they are rather talking about an identified type of animal among other types. The use of *The* also presupposes that such a type is known by both the sender and the receiver of the message.

Leech and Svartvik (1994) have written something very helpful about the use of the definite article. They argue that "English tends to treat mass nouns and plural nouns as generic when they are pre-modified. But when they are post-modified, especially by an of-phrase, the definite article normally has to be present" (p. 38). Actually, English generally uses the definite article *The* in of-phrases. The reason is that *of* indicates that the noun it follows must normally be identified vis-à-vis what comes after; the post-modification that comes after the head noun establishes identity as well. For instance, in *The leg of the table*, *The* cannot but occur in such a kind of reference phrase insofar as the speaker is talking about a specific *leg* that is that of the table.* Unlike the *of*-phrases, when the head noun is pre-modified by an adjective, the definite article can be used or left out depending upon the context and what the speaker has in mind. This means that *The* is used when talking about a referent that is viewed as particular or specific and left out when dealing with a referent that is considered to be generic. In this manner, both *The handsome man* and *Senegalese society* are correct reference phrases with different interpretations.

Leech and Svartvik (1994) have also stated that *The* is used "When identity has been established by an earlier mention (often with an indefinite article)" (p. 35). This kind of use is about anaphoric reference; it means that the knowledge of the referent of the noun the definite

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* There are some exceptions in which *The* is omitted in of-phrases.

article *The* modifies is based on an element that has already been mentioned in speech or writing. In this case, *The* means what has just been talked about or mentioned. In the first mention, the head noun is modified by the indefinite article *a* and in the second one, it is *The* that makes the modification by indicating that the referent of the noun in use is now known by both the sender and the receiver of the message. This is what is exemplified in *He bought a horse. The horse he bought is faster than mine*. After dealing with the use of the definite article, let us now turn to that of the indefinite article that seems to be mistakenly used by French speaking researchers at times.

According to Eckersley and Eckersley (1960), the indefinite article is used in the sense of *one, any, it does not matter which*. They go on saying that it is also used for some "Expressions of measurement", "Before dozen, hundred, thousand, million", "Before singular predicative nouns denoting a profession, trade, religion, class, etc.", "to refer to a person known only as a name", "Before a noun in apposition when the thing or person is assumed to be unfamiliar" (p. 52-53-54). Unlike the modification made by the definite article, the indefinite article generally expresses that the referents of head nouns it modifies are not specific; this means that they are not defined in the outside world. With such a usage, one cannot say whether the modified noun exactly refers to this or that in the real world. In fact, after the modification made by the indefinite article, the listener can ask a question starting by *Which* in order to know the very referent of the head noun. For instance, in *A teacher took my book*, one can ask *Which teacher?* because the use of *A* does not help identify the teacher that took the book.

The indefinite article appears in two forms (*a* and *an*) depending upon the sound that is given by the initial of the element it follows immediately. *A* is used before a consonant sound and *an* before a vowel sound. Eckersley and Eckersley (1960) state that the indefinite article "*a* is used before a word beginning with *a* consonant sound; *an* before a word beginning with a vowel sound" (p. 51). The rule is not about consonants and vowels, but whether the sound gives a vowel or a consonant one. For instance, in the reference phrase *A university*, the initial letter of the head noun is a vowel, but the sound gives a consonant one hence the use of *a* instead of *an*.

There are some situations in which the indefinite article is omitted. Following Eckersley and Eckersley (1960), it is not used "if the noun denotes a title or office that can only be held by one person at a time" (p. 53). This is the case in an example like *They made her Queen*. According to Eckersley and Eckersley (1960), *a* "is not used after the verb <u>turn</u> in the meaning <u>become</u>" "nor after the nouns rank or title" (p. 53). These rules can be seen in examples like *She was a teacher, but she turned singer*; *He is now called Doctor*.

The indefinite article is not used with uncountable nouns that cannot be considered individually. If reference phrases like **an information*, **an advice*, **a furniture, etc.,* are

ungrammatical, it is because the indefinite article cannot be used to modify a mass noun directly. In the case of mass nouns, the modification with the indefinite article *a/an* is possible by means of elements that can help measure, quantify or count such nouns. For instance, to talk about *information*, *advice*, and *furniture* individually, one can have recourse to *a piece of*. As such, about the nouns that have been given, one will utter *a piece of information*, *a piece of advice*, and *a piece of furniture*. After having demonstrated rules about the use of the definite and indefinite articles, the following section is devoted to the researcher's objectives.

2. Objectives of the research

This research aims at:

-showing semantic modifications the use of the definite and indefinite articles makes in English reference phrases;

-identifying the types of mistakes PhD researchers make about the use of English articles in a French speaking university.

The two main objectives this research has are in connection with the research questions that are indicated in the following section.

3. Research questions

With this paper, the researcher is fixing to answer the following questions:

-What kinds of semantic modifications do English articles make in reference phrases?

-What are the kinds of mistakes French speaking Ph.D researchers make about the use of English articles in their doctoral theses?

The definite and indefinite articles are referent phrase modifiers whose occurrence or non-occurrence grammatically or semantically affects the way in which head nouns are construed. In this way, the inappropriate use of these articles on the part of researchers can lead to sending unintentional information or creating ungrammaticality.

4. Research hypotheses

The hypotheses are the following:

-There are different semantic modifications that are made by the occurrence of the definite and indefinite articles in the layered structure of the reference phrase.

-French speaking PhD researchers make mistakes about the use of both the definite and indefinite articles.

The paper has two hypotheses that are related to the two research questions and objectives that have already been demonstrated.

5. Methodology

It is qualitative research that is chosen for this paper. Data that are used are derived from doctoral theses that were defended in the Department of English at Cheikh Anta DIOP University. The main instrument that was used to collect data was documentary analysis that is defined by Bowen (2009) as "a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents-both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material" (p. 27). Documents can be used to get information one can analyze to answer research questions related to a specific context. As such, academic documents can provide data that help get more insights about how language is used by both teachers and students. Beyond such a use, one can realize the kind of attention that is given to meaning creation, grammaticality and ungrammaticality in general.

Since this research has got its data from doctoral theses, it takes into consideration some criteria researchers should pay attention to when conducting documentary analysis. Scott (1990) gives four criteria that are: credibility, authenticity, representativeness, and meaning. Credibility refers to whether the researcher can rely on the information got from the document in use. Authenticity is about whether the origin of the document is reliable. Representativeness is related to the context and whether the document is pertinent to the research one is conducting. And lastly, the content of the used document should be clear and understandable in order that the researcher can interpret it and get meaning from it. Having used theses that have already been defended, this paper takes into consideration the four criteria Scott (1990) postulates.

The researcher has collected data from twenty (20) different theses he read while being mindful of the uses of the definite and indefinite articles in such theses. The theses from which data were collected were all supervised by full professors. It is also relevant to mention that the theses that are under study were elaborated by researchers that were selected to become PhD candidates based on their own merits.

6. Results and Discussion

Data that were collected from the different theses can be grouped in two categories for both the definite and indefinite articles. These are about their ungrammaticality, and unnecessary use in various contexts with changes at the semantic interpretation level. First, let us demonstrate some examples of constructions in which the definite and indefinite articles are either misused, or absent from reference phrases where their occurrence is needed to convey relevant information. Such examples are all derived from accepted and defended theses of the Department of English at Cheikh Anta DIOP University.

(1) This chapter presents the background to the study, problems relating to the study, the study objectives, **research questions**, the significance of the study, **an outline of the study** together with its scope and limitations.

(2) We have then chosen to deal with **the determiners** for they are very important in the field of grammar, since they can guarantee the relation between words and may be able to change the meaning of utterances.

(3) According to Wikipedia (2011) a modifier is as well-known as a quantifier that is an optional element in a phrase structure. It says that the modifier when removed may not necessarily affect the grammaticality of the construction. **The modifiers** are semantically said to describe more accurately the meaning of another element.

(4) Although writers have conducted a lot of research about grammar, learners keep on making mistakes in the use of some linguistic aspects particularly **the pronouns** and adjectives. Some English pronouns can also be confused with **the adjectives**, because they are very close.

(5) A personal pronoun replaces **noun** which is called **antecedent**, for example, although England is very hot, it is my favourite country.

(6) In addition, other writers have dealt with **the relative pronouns** and the manner they are used in a sentence.

(7) Indeed, Wolof personal pronouns have **difference** in the weak and the strong forms as in the other languages.

(8) The aim of this study is to urge **the English and the Wolof users** to be aware of the essential stages as far as **the pronouns** are concerned in learning and writing.

(9) At the time of **the World War I** and after, in a Europe having little self-confidence in itself, being filled with unstable ideologies and conditions which caused a great deal of upset, there goes a feeling that the state of being socially stable has been weakened[…].

(10)   The group of rappers called the Last Poets has rekindled the dimension of the rap message through live street concerts. For them, in **the music**, the importance was especially words and their meaning.

(11)   They used **the words** as they exist in their different languages and without any feeling of deviation. This language act clearly shows that rappers are not at all afraid of any legal action.

(12)   A manner for the rapper to denounce **the slavery** that makes that blacks are relegated at the second plan.

(13) ***The Princess Kadjaba Dongo*** *too is victimized by men.*

(14) Today, many linguists would agree on the fact that there is no single definition for language, judging by the variety of definitions found in **the linguistic books***.*

As it can be seen in the different examples above, the definite and indefinite articles are used in the analyzed theses in ways one can describe and discuss in order to give more understanding about the very meanings they convey. First, let us start by the use of the definite article.

Data collected from various theses show that the definite article is used to make unintended semantic modifications. Such modifications are triggered by either the misuse of the definite article or its absence in contexts where its use is required. For instance, in examples like (2), (3), (4), (6), (8), (9), (10), (11), (12), (13), and (14), the use of the definite article seems to be inappropriate contextually. In fact, in these examples, the use of *the* makes a semantic modification according to which the used head nouns refer to particularized referents that should normally and contextually be generalized. For example, the reference phrase *the determiners* in example (2) means that the author does not talk about determiners in general, but rather specified determiners in a specific context, which is inappropriate if one considers the context in which the writing is done. Actually, the context shows that the author is dealing with determiners in general; from this point of view, in order to avoid conveying irrelevant information, the non-occurrence of the definite article *the* is required. Hewings (2005) argues that *the* is not used with nouns to talk about things in general. Both *determiners* and *the determiners* are meaningful reference phrases, but they do not send the same message insofar as the occurrence or non-occurrence of the definite article makes a semantic difference that should always be taken into account when writing in academic contexts. If French uses the definite article *the* to talk about things in general, this is not normally the case in English.

Unlike what is shown in the other examples, in (9) and (13), *the* is not used to specify the head nouns it co-occurs with; its use creates ungrammaticality because such kinds of reference phrases express definiteness without the use of the definite article. Following Murphy (2004), *the* is not used in a reference phrase that is about a title + a proper noun or a noun + a number. In example (9), *the World War I is odd in meaning inasmuch as both *the* and *I* (one, a number) cannot be used to define the head noun at once. *World War I* (without the occurrence of *the*) is already a defined reference phrase because the used number helps to identify which *World War* the speaker/writer and the listener/reader must have in mind as shared information. After using a reference phrase that is composed of a noun + a number, there is no need to ask a question in order to know which referent this is about. Equally, the use of a reference phrase that consists of a title

+ a proper noun does not trigger such a kind of question either. As such, *The Princess Kadjaba Dongo* is ungrammatical insofar as *Princess Kadjaba Dongo* without the article *the* is a specified reference phrase; actually, the use of the proper noun *Kadjaba Dongo* shows which princess this is about.

In example (1), the reference phrase *research questions* is used without the realization of the definite article *the*, whereas, in the same sentence, this co-occurs with the other reference phrases it modifies. These reference phrases are *the study objectives* and *the significance of the study* that are both specified by means of *the*. The use of *the* indicates that *the objectives* and *the significance* pertain to the study; they are then particularized unlike *research questions* that are generalized. The noun phrase *The research questions* is different in meaning from *research questions* insofar as if the former is about specific questions (those of the study), the latter refers to questions in a general sense not in the particular sense of the study.

In short, after our reading different theses of the Department of English, it has been found that some researchers make four kinds of mistakes about the use of the definite article. Such mistakes are the use of *the* where there must occur no article to talk about things generally, the occurrence of *the* in reference phrases composed of a noun + a number, the realization of *the* in reference phrases whose components are a title + a proper noun, and the omission of the definite article *the* that helps refer to head nouns as unspecified referents. Unlike the second and third types of mistakes that create ungrammaticality, the first and fourth ones modify the meaning of reference phrases, which lead researchers to conveying meanings they do not seem to be aware of.

In addition to the definite article, some odd uses have also been found about the indefinite article as is exemplified in (1), (5), and (7). For example, in (1), the reference phrase *an outline of the study* refers to something that is not known or is considered to be one among other outlines; such an interpretation is possible because of the modification the indefinite article makes. Following Eckersley and Eckersley (1960), the indefinite article *a/an* is used to mean *one* or *it does not matter which*. As such, since the outline mentioned in the studied thesis is not about any outline or one outline among others, the use of *an* is then irrelevant. In fact, since the outline of the study is already known or defined, the indefinite article cannot normally be used. *An outline of the study* is not shared information, whereas *the outline of the study* indicates that the speaker/writer and the listener/reader have the same referent in mind.

In example (5), the nouns *noun* and *antecedent* appear without any articles, which seems to create ungrammaticality while having an impact on the semantic interpretation. The context in which the two nouns are used show that they must co-occur with the indefinite article in order to be modified meaningfully. Since the two nouns are not uncountable nouns, realizing them with

zero article in such a context creates semantic oddity. *A noun* and *an antecedent* do not convey the same information as *noun* and *antecedent*. *A noun* and *an antecedent* mean any noun and *any antecedent*, whereas one does not have any clear understanding about the referents of *noun* and *antecedent* in the context where they are used. Like example (5), example (7) also shows a mistake that is related to the omission of the indefinite article.

In a nutshell, the collected data have demonstrated that not only do some researchers use the indefinite article in contexts where it is not needed, but they also often omit it in constructions where its modification is useful at the level of semantic interpretation.

7. Conclusion

In short, it can be noted down that the collected data have revealed that some mistakes are made about the use of the definite and indefinite articles by PhD students in a French speaking institution like Cheikh Anta DIOP University. There are more mistakes found about the definite article than the indefinite article. Researchers misuse the definite article to make inappropriate modifications they do not seem to pay attention to. It has been found that some reference phrases that are about particular referents in the outside world are realized without the definite article *the*, which ends up giving them an interpretation according to which their referents are talked about generally. On the other hand, some reference phrases whose referents must be talked about generally are unintentionally modified by the definite article; as such, they are unintentionally particularized by researchers.

As far as the use of the indefinite article is concerned, there are two types of mistakes that are made by researchers. Zero article is used where the indefinite article must appear; the definite article is used in reference phrases that contextually require the use of the indefinite article to convey appropriate information. As such, if the use of zero article creates ungrammaticality, the use of the definite article (the) in reference phrases where the indefinite article (a/an) must be used makes an unintentional semantic modification. For there to be relevant information about referent phrases, French speaking researchers should not only be careful about the modification made by the definite article when elaborating academic documents, but also how the indefinite article contributes to meaning creation. These two types of articles are reference phrase operators whose appropriate use must not be neglected inasmuch as they make modifications that shift people's understanding of sent messages. The same reference phrase used with or without the definite and indefinite articles is not given the same interpretation.

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