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## Misconceptions about Article Use in English

### Summary

The paper addresses some major misconceptions about article use in English, proceeding from purely syntactic issues to those relating directly to pragmatics. It is based on authentic, perfectly acceptable examples of article use that many Slovenian students of English would describe as 'odd' or 'not in accordance with the rules'. The students' explanations as to why the examples in question should be ruled out confirm the hypothesis that misconceptions about article use are largely ascribable to an insufficient understanding of grammatical rules. The rules governing article use are often misunderstood due to inaccurate interpretations of the terms *defining/restrictive*, *definite*, *identifying*, *specifying*, *classifying*, etc. The commonest mistake is equating *defining* with *definite*, and *defining/restrictive* with *identifying*, the consequence being the overuse of the definite article. Another important point made in the paper is that article use is a matter of pragmatics. The choice between the definite and indefinite articles reflects the speaker's decision to present a piece of information as hearer-old or hearer-new respectively.

**Key words:** article use, (in)definiteness, reference, identification, restrictive function, identifying function, old and new information

## Zmote o rabi člena v angleščini

### Povzetek

V članku obravnavam nekaj večjih zmot o rabi člena v angleščini, in sicer od takšnih povsem skladenjske narave do takšnih, ki spadajo naravnost v pragmatiko. Članek je zasnovan na pristnih angleških, popolnoma sprejemljivih zgledih rabe člena, ki pa so po mnenju mnogih slovenskih študentov angleščine 'čudni' oziroma 'niso v skladu s pravili'. Razlage, ki jih ob tem navajajo študentje, potrjujejo predpostavko, da je zmote o rabi člena v veliki meri moč pripisati pomanjkljivemu razumevanju slovničnih pravil. Napačno razumevanje pravil je pogosto posledica nepravilnega tolmačenja izrazov *omejevalnost*, *določnost*, *identifikacija*, *specifičnost*, *vrstnost* itd. Najpogostejša napaka je enačenje *omejevalnosti* z *določnostjo* oziroma *identifikacijo*, kar ima za posledico prekomerno rabo določnega člena. Sploh pa je raba člena stvar pragmatike. Izbira med določnim in nedoločnim členom odraža odločitev govorca o tem, ali bo poslušalcu nekaj predstavil kot že znano ali kot novo informacijo.

**Ključne besede:** raba člena, (ne)določnost, referenca, identifikacija, omejevalna funkcija, identifikacijska funkcija, stara in nova informacija

# Misconceptions about Article Use in English

## 1. Introduction

A point came in my teaching career when I realized that the only way to thoroughly understand the students' mistakes was to find out what was going on in their heads. So I asked the students in my 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year translation classes to start collecting authentic examples of article use they might find 'odd' or 'not in accordance with the rules'. I also asked them to provide explanations of why they thought them problematic. Interestingly, most of these 'striking' examples turned out to be perfectly explicable in terms of the very same rules the students would use as arguments to prove the opposite. This brought me to the root of the problem: the students seem to know the rules, but they do not quite *understand* them. The paper points out some major misconceptions that have arisen regarding article use in English.

## 2. The Saxon Genitive

The first point of attention is the Saxon Genitive and its cooccurrence with the article. A surprising number of students find examples like those in (1) ungrammatical because, as they claim, 'the Saxon Genitive cannot be preceded by a determiner'.

(1) ♥<sup>1</sup>

- a. the world's first national park
- b. the Queen's dazzling crown jewels
- c. the unique ecosystem's death sentence
- d. Diamonds are a girl's best friends.
- e. Self-consciousness is a man's worst enemy.
- f. A violin's authenticity can only be determined through [...]

It is true that a possessive determiner is mutually exclusive with other (central) determiners because the (central) determiner position in an English noun phrase can be filled only once (cf. Biber et al. 1999, 294, Quirk et al. 1985, 326). This explains why *a bike* and *Peter's bike* are correct whereas *\*a Peter's bike* is not. Nevertheless, the misconception that has grown up around article-possessor complementarity is that phrases like *a boy's bike* are of the same type as *\*a Peter's bike*, with two determiners placed side by side. The key question is: What counts as one determiner? An article, a demonstrative pronoun, a possessive pronoun, a Saxon Genitive phrase. It is crucial to make it clear that even in *Peter's bike* the determiner is a Saxon Genitive *phrase*, not a Saxon Genitive noun. In other words, the determiner is a noun phrase in the genitive case. Bracketing can be of help too: [*the/that/a/some boy*]'s bike; [*the world*]'s first national park. There is something in brackets and that *something* is in the genitive case, with the whole lot (be it one word or more) representing one single determiner. If the article or pronoun in question is inside the brackets, its use cannot be precluded by the one-determiner-only rule. A nice test for that would be shifting the material from the Saxon Genitive phrase

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1 Throughout the paper, a little heart is used to mark examples listed by my students.

into the postmodification: *the bike owned by [the/that/some boy]*; *the first national park in [the world]*.

The vagueness of the students' comments on (1) is further proved by cases where a Saxon Genitive noun is used as a classifier and does not occupy the determiner position. In the noun phrase *a lady's bike*, for example, the classifier *lady's* restricts the headword *bike* to a particular type: *a [lady's bike]*. The determiner preceding the classifier can also be a Saxon Genitive phrase: [*that child*]'s [*lady's bike*] (i.e. *the [bike for ladies] owned by [that child]*).

### 3. Ordinal Numerals

It's a common fallacy that an ordinal numeral *per se* triggers the use of the definite article. Examples in (2) are by no means ungrammatical.

(2)♥

- a. The book he bought at the auction proved to be a *first* edition.
- b. More creative forms of help might be to put them on a credit card as a *second* card holder.
- c. The play was followed by a *second* sermon, reinforcing the lesson of the representation.
- d. They had a *third* child a year ago.

An ordinal numeral must be preceded by the definite article when a kind of *mathematical order* is implied. This, however, is not the case if the numeral has the function of a classifier, forming a very close syntactic unit or even a compound with the head noun, or if its meaning corresponds to that of *other*. Compare (3) and (4):

(3) They have three children. The *first* was born the year they got married, the *second* a couple of years later, and the *third* a year ago.

(4)

- a. I'd like a *second* opinion on that matter.
- b. Do you have a *second* name?
- c. I think you should give him a *second* chance.
- d. She took a *second* spoon of sugar, and a *third* one, and a *fourth* one, and [...]

### 4. Prepositional Phrases and Relative Clauses

One of the major misconceptions about articles in English is the belief that an of-phrase (or a prepositional phrase in general) in postmodifying position triggers the use of the definite article. Accordingly, many a student would rule out the sentences in (5) as ungrammatical.

(5)♥

- a. Immediately, we are in an *atmosphere of artificiality*.
- b. In ( ) *areas where a thick blanket of snow lay luxuriantly right down to the valley a hundred*

*years ago*, only dirty patches can be seen today.

c. In a survey of farmed salmon on sale at major stores, ( ) *samples from Morrisons* contained malachite green.

The examples in (5) are, of course, perfectly acceptable. The above-mentioned ‘rule’ applies only in cases when the function of the prepositional phrase is *identifying*, i.e. when it narrows down the set of possible referents of the headword to a unique, identifiable referent or subset of referents. Very often, however, the prepositional phrase merely restricts the meaning of the headword to a particular class. This *restrictive* function is not to be confused with the identifying one. The same degree of cautiousness is needed when the head noun is postmodified by a restrictive (i.e. defining) relative clause. The fact that *defining* is often misunderstood as ‘making definite’ is likely to lead to confusion. It should be noted that it is not necessary for a defining relative clause to identify the referent and ‘make the head noun definite’. Definitions of *restrictive* can be confusing too. Trask (1993, 239), for example, describes a restrictive item as ‘a modifier whose presence is essential for identifying the referent of the noun phrase’. I find this definition rather misleading, for it blurs the boundary between *restrictive* and *identifying*. Its vagueness lies in the fact that a restrictive modifier may well be essential for identification, but it will not suffice for the hearer to uniquely identify the referent. Or, in terms of formal logic, a restrictive modifier is a necessary condition for identification, but not a sufficient one.

Misconceptions about the function of restrictive postmodification, along with the confusing terminology, give rise to the overuse of the definite article, especially in the plural. The key word here is reference. The presence of a restrictive postmodifier often makes it hard to decide whether the reference of a plural noun phrase is definite, indefinite or generic. It is therefore advisable to put the head noun into the singular and check the items that occur in determiner position. These should make the reference clear, as in (6) and (7) below.

(6)

- a. The matter was first brought to our attention by *readers of this magazine*.
- b. The matter was first brought to our attention by *people who read this magazine*.
- c. The matter was first brought to our attention by a/some reader of this magazine.
- d. The matter was first brought to our attention by a/some person who reads this magazine / by somebody who reads this magazine.

(Reference: specific, **indefinite**)

(7)

- a. *Readers of such magazines* know what an invaluable source of inspiration they are.
- b. *People who read such magazines* know what an invaluable source of inspiration they are.
- c. A/Any reader of such magazines knows what an invaluable source of inspiration they are.
- d. A/Any person who / Anybody who reads such magazines knows what an invaluable source of inspiration they are.

(Reference: **generic**)

The point I want to make here is that notwithstanding the restrictive postmodification of *readers* and *people* above, their reference is not definite. Both types of postmodifier (i.e. the of-phrase and the relative clause) in (6) and (7) are *restrictive*, but neither of them is *identifying*. In other words, the postmodifier restricts the set of possible referents to a subset, but it does not enable the hearer to uniquely identify it. In (6), the speaker may have some specific readers in mind, but he presents them as indefinite because he does not expect the hearer to be able to identify them (cf. Taylor 1996, 185). In (7), the noun phrase headed by *readers* refers to a particular type of readers in general or, following Taylor (1996, 186), it is ‘used to make a statement about a category of entities as a whole’.

Although the identifying and restrictive functions are to be kept clearly apart, they are not unrelated. In fact, the former derives from the latter, provided that the primary set of possible referents is already identified. The situation is illustrated in (8).

- (8)
- a. In general, *students that are good at maths* are good at grammar too. (**generic**: a–b)
  - b. In general, *a student that is good at maths* is good at grammar too.
  - c. The teacher gave *the students* some extra homework. (specific, **definite**: c–f)
  - d. The teacher gave *the students that were good at grammar* no additional homework.
  - e. The teacher gave *the student that was top in grammar* no additional homework.
  - f. The teacher gave *the student* some extra homework.

In (8a–b) and (8d–e) the same type of postmodification is used: a restrictive relative clause. If we compare (8a) and (8d), or (8b) and (8e), we can see that although the same type of clause is used as a postmodifier, the respective headwords do not share the same kind of reference. Furthermore, the reference can be definite even if there is no restrictive postmodification, as in (8c) and (8f). In (8c), the identification starts with the subject of the sentence, which sets in motion the following chain: the teacher > his/her class > his/her students = the students. The very same process is repeated in (8d) and (8e). When the primary set of referents (i.e. all the students in the class = the students) is identified, the postmodifying clause restricts it to a subset. This final set of referents contains only those members of the primary set that belong to the type described by the clause. What might come as a real revelation at this point is the observation that the definite article in sentences like (8d) and (8e) is not due to the restrictive postmodifier but rather to the specific, definite reference of the headword before it becomes postmodified. The identification of the final set of referents is possible only if the primary set of referents is identified first. This goes hand in hand with the view that a restrictive postmodifier is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for identification.

The identification in (8f) can follow the same path as that in (8c), provided there is only one student in the class: the teacher > his/her class > his/her student = the student. If there are more students in the class, one of them must be singled out in the discourse before (8f) is uttered. (9) and (10) below illustrate the case in point. (8f) is repeated here as (9b) and (10b).

(9)

- a. *The student that had cheated* admitted that the use of articles was a mystery to him.
- b. The teacher gave *the student* some extra homework. (= 8f)

(10)

- a. *A student* complained to the teacher that the exercises he had set were too easy.
- b. The teacher gave *the student* some extra homework. (= 8f)

Example (9) illustrates ‘derived identification’ (cf. Anderson 2004). The identification process in (9a) runs parallel to that in (8e), the fully established identity of *the student* in (9a) being picked up in (9b). In (10), on the other hand, the referent in question is introduced into the discourse through (10a) as a specific, yet not specifically identified entity. Or, as Anderson (2004) puts it, ‘the speaker has a specific referent in mind, but does not, or cannot, identify it to the addressee’. Thus the specific identity of *the student* in (10b) is not established. This type of identification is referred to as ‘nonspecific identification’ (ibid).

Example (10) raises another interesting aspect. It may be true that every uniquely identifiable entity is referred to by a definite expression, but not every definite expression refers to a uniquely identifiable entity. Let us compare (11) and (12).

(11)

- a. They live on *the outskirts of Paris*.
- b. The stolen car was found in *the vicinity of the station*.
- c. There are two birds nesting in *the top of the tree*.

(12)

- a. They live on *the outskirts of a big city*.
- b. The car was found in *the vicinity of an old building*.
- c. Have you ever seen a bird nesting in *the top of a tree*?

The headword of each italicized phrase in (11) and (12) is a relational noun with a one-place argument. The relation between the two can be explained in terms of a part-whole relationship where the given ‘part’ (be it an item or a group of items) is the only of its kind within the same ‘whole’. If, as in (11), the ‘whole’ is presented as a specific, definite, identifiable entity, the ‘part’ named by the headword is uniquely identifiable too. The reference of *the outskirts*, *the vicinity* and *the top* in (11) is definite. In (12), on the other hand, the ‘whole’ is presented as an indefinite entity, specific in (12a–b), nonspecific in (12c). Since the ‘whole’ cannot be identified, none of its ‘parts’ can be identified either. Thus the reference of *the outskirts*, *the vicinity* and *the top* in (12) is indefinite. The reference can be tested by replacing the given phrase with a one-word equivalent. For example:

(13)

- a. Have you ever seen a bird nesting in *the top of a tree*? (= 12c)
- b. Have you ever seen a bird nesting in *a treetop*?

The indefinite article in (13b) should be convincing enough. Compare:

(14)

- a. There are two birds nesting in *the top of the tree*. (= 11c)
- b. There are two birds nesting in *the treetop*.

The examples in (12) illustrate the same phenomenon as (10): nonspecific identification. There are two entities involved, A and B. Entity A could be uniquely identified on the basis of its relation with B if B were a specific, definite entity. Since B is indefinite, no specific identity of A can be established.

Nonspecific identification can be observed even in cases where entity B (underlined below) is definite. Example (15) is taken from Anderson (2004, 444).

(15)

- a. Whoever (s)he may be, *the murderer of those people* is insane.
- b. Whoever (s)he may be, *the author of this pamphlet* is a liar.

## 5. Restrictive Premodification

A strong tendency to overuse the definite article can also be observed when the meaning of the headword is restricted by certain types of premodification:

(16)♥

- a. *ancient* Greece; *present-day* Germany; *9<sup>th</sup>-century* Northumbria
- b. *British* Egyptologists; *Egyptian* surgeons; *Slovenian* archaeologists; *Arabic* scholars
- c. *human* language; *twentieth-century* linguistics
- d. The chemical was used as a cheap alternative to *licensed* medicines for dealing with parasites.

The winners in this respect are items denoting periods of time (especially when premodifying geographical names) and nationalities or countries of origin. This is likely due to two facts. First, the specific, unique, definite reference of these entities makes them highly reliable means of identifying other entities. Second, they seem to evoke pictures of contrast in the hearer's head, for example: 'ancient, not modern', 'British, not Slovenian', etc. Another problem arises when the premodifier begins with an ordinal numeral (which I call 'double trouble' in class) because many a student will see this as an additional argument for using the definite article. To illustrate how the definite article before an ordinal disappears when the ordinal introduces a premodifying item, the following example can be used:

(17)

- a. works by many sculptors and architects of [the 20<sup>th</sup> century]
- b. works by many [20<sup>th</sup> century] sculptors and architects

- c. works by many of *the* [20<sup>th</sup> century] *sculptors and architects*
- d. works by many of *the* above-mentioned *sculptors and architects*

It should be noted that the definite article in (17c) has nothing to do with the ordinal numeral. This is confirmed by (17d), where the same article is used, occupying the determiner position in the phrase co-headed by *sculptors* and *architects*.

Example (17) may help dismiss one argument, but it still remains rather difficult to comprehend why no definite article is needed in (16). In the case of countable nouns, the strategy of singularization (cf. (6–8)) can be employed to check the reference:

- (18)
- a. British Egyptologists have made a new, surprising discovery.
  - b. A/Some British Egyptologist has made a new, surprising discovery.

It should be admitted, though, that the definite article with plural headwords is often merely redundant rather than wrong:

- (19)
- a. The chemical was used as a cheap alternative to (the) licensed medicines for dealing with parasites. (<> 16d)
  - b. The chemical was used as a cheap alternative to any licensed medicine (= any of the licensed medicines) for dealing with parasites.

One explanation could be the view that despite its generalizing meaning, *licensed medicines* in (16d) involves partitivity, i.e. it assumes the existence of a particular subset of medicines. It is obvious that the example does not represent the core generic type, for ‘full genericness demands both nonspecificity and nonpartitivity’ (Anderson 2004, 446). My point here is that genericness seems to be far closer to definiteness than we like to think. If we think of people in general, for example, isn’t it possible to perceive them as ‘definite’ in the sense that they represent one big, unique, identifiable ‘group’: mankind? It should nevertheless be pointed out that a generic interpretation of a definite plural in English is possible only if it has an attributive (Anderson 2004, 448). This explains why *the licensed medicines for dealing with parasites* can be generic whereas *the medicines* would yield only a specific, definite interpretation.

If, on the other hand, the reference is indefinite, the definite article is unacceptable:

- (20)
- a. The chemical was used as a cheap alternative to (some/\*the) licensed medicines for dealing with parasites.
  - b. The chemical was used as a cheap alternative to a/some licensed medicine (= one of the licensed medicines) for dealing with parasites.

A similar line of reasoning can be adopted in cases where the reference of a plural noun is restricted by the context:

(21)♥

- a. The wheel and its axle are now at the Institute of Archaeology, where they are awaiting preservation. [...] ( ) **Experts** have also started on the reconstruction of the cart.
- b. Britain decided to site a military base at Aldabra, effectively turning it into a giant aircraft carrier. ( ) **Campaigners** rolled back that decision in what was feted as a landmark victory for the modern environmental movement.

As regards (16a) and (16c), where no tests like singularization are available, the logic behind the omission of the article is much less obvious. Longobardi (2002, 358–9) bases his explanation of instances like (16a) on the absence of overt N-to-D raising of proper names in English. Anderson (2004, 444–6) points out that proper names are self-identifying and as such definite when used as arguments. Thus (16a) can partly be explained by drawing a parallel to (8d), where the definite article is not due to the restrictive clause postmodifying the headword, but to the specific, definite reference of the headword before it gets postmodified. The postmodifier simply restricts this already definite set of referents to a (definite) subset. Compare:

(22)

- a. The teacher gave *the students* some extra homework. (= 8c)
- b. The teacher gave *the students that were good at grammar* no additional homework. (= 8d)
- c. I'm reading a book about *Egypt*.
- d. I'm reading a book about *ancient Egypt*.

## 6. Old and New Information

The article use to be discussed in this section is an intriguing issue. It should be noted that in most (if not all) of the examples below, the indefinite article (or its zero counterpart preceding a name, an uncountable noun or a noun in the plural) can be replaced by the definite article or some other definite determiner. The question is therefore not that of grammaticality. Example (23), for example, is no less grammatical if the indefinite article is omitted:

(23)

- a. ♥ I explained that **a Mr. George Cole**, with whom I was currently acting, had damaged it.
- b. I explained that Mr. George Cole, with whom I was currently acting, had damaged it.

In fact, (23b) seems to be completely in accordance with the general view that a known, old piece of information is not to be presented as an indefinite entity. That the person referred to as *Mr. George Cole* is known to the speaker is obvious from the information given in the postmodifying clause. But is he known to the hearer too? According to (23b), the answer is yes. The use of a name in (23b) conveys the speaker's assumption that the hearer too can identify the referent. As pointed out by Anderson (2004, 443), the speaker's and hearer's assumed co-identification of

an entity is reflected in the use of a name, a deictic or some other definite expression. If, on the other hand, the speaker assumes that the hearer cannot identify the given entity, an indefinite expression should be used. Example (23a) is a case in point.

It is crucial to understand that an entity that may be perfectly known to the speaker is not necessarily identifiable from the hearer's point of view. The speaker must tailor his message to the hearer's knowledge and expectations, otherwise the communication is likely to break down. The hearer's mind is therefore a constant subject of speculation on the part of the speaker.

Example (24) contains a typical description, with a number of indefinite entities introduced one after another. Of interest here are the indefinite article in front of *field* and the zero article in front of *bushes*. Again, the definite article could be used instead, but that would imply that the hearer should already know about the field and the bushes or at least find them identifiable on the basis of the given context (cf. *the station; the road*). The speaker, however, has decided to present the field and the bushes in the same way as the rest of the enumerated entities, that is as hearer-new.

(24)♥ With a sort of military precision that astonished him, she outlined the route that he was to follow. A half-hour railway journey; turn left outside the station; two kilometres along the road: a gate with the top bar missing; a path across **a field**; a grass-grown lane; a track between ( ) **bushes**; a dead tree with ( ) moss on it.

The message is as follows:

>> 'You will see *a field* and a path across it; you will see ( ) *bushes* and a track between them.'

It often happens in a narrative that something presented as hearer-new is in fact not new for the reader but only for a character in the story. Let us suppose that the route described in (24) really exists and that somebody who actually lives there happens to be reading the above description. Should such a reader find the indefinite article disturbing? No, when he realizes that he is in fact only an 'indirect' receiver of the message conveyed by the description.

It is possible to imagine a situation where the speaker (person A) describes the route to somebody who doesn't know it (person B), and then reports this to somebody who knows the route very well (person C). Let us compare the following two scenarios:

(25)

a. (A to B) There is a gate with the top bar missing; a path across a field; a grass-grown lane; a track between ( ) bushes; a dead tree with ( ) moss on it.

(A to C) I told B about the gate with the top bar missing; the path across the field; the grass-grown lane; the track between the bushes; the dead tree with all that moss on it.

b. (A to B) There is a gate with the top bar missing; a path across a field; a grass-grown lane; a track between ( ) bushes; a dead tree with ( ) moss on it.

(A to C) I told B about a gate with the top bar missing; a path across a field; a grass-grown lane; a track between ( ) bushes; a dead tree with ( ) moss on it.

The difference lies in the speaker's choice of perspective. Although A knows that C can identify any part of the route, he can decide to present it from B's point of view. In other words, the speaker can decide to treat a hearer-old entity as hearer-new.

Similarly, the fact that everybody knows about Einstein's contribution to the development of the nuclear bomb does not preclude the possibility of presenting the bomb as a new piece of information:

(26)♥ When I failed to become a concert pianist, or even an accompanist for the church youth choir, she finally explained that I was late-blooming, like Einstein, who everyone thought was retarded until he discovered **a bomb**.

>> 'who everyone thought was retarded until *something happened*: He discovered *a bomb*.'

As is illustrated in (27), information presented as hearer-new typically yields an existential interpretation:<sup>2</sup>

(27)♥ With ( ) **hyperinflation**, ( ) **wages** among the lowest in Europe and **an agricultural system** that sometimes seems a vestige from the last century, the country is facing big problems.

>> 'There are ( ) *hyperinflation*, ( ) *wages* [...] and *an agricultural system* [...], and because of this the country is facing big problems.'

While, due to its existential meaning, (27) is relatively straightforward, more attention should be devoted to the following example:

(28)♥ In **a life** lived largely for the sake of others, it was the one place that was her own.

A 4<sup>th</sup> year student made the following comment on (28): 'To me, *In the life lived* [...] would sound better since that *life* is definite: first, it is hers, and second, it is lived for the sake of others.' The student may have had a point: the life in question *is* definite. Compare:

(29) In her life / this life of hers, lived largely for the sake of others, it was the one place that was her own.

But the second of the two arguments given by the student should be dismissed. The postmodifier in (28) in no way contributes to the definite reference of the headword. It should also be noted that the solution proposed by the student (with the definite article and a restrictive postmodifier) would imply that the character concerned lived at least two lives.

The function of the postmodifier in (28) is to highlight a particular aspect of the character's life, presenting it as new information. This is reflected in the use of the indefinite article. The

<sup>2</sup> This, however, should not imply that existentials serve solely to introduce new referents into the discourse. The postverbal noun phrase in an existential *there*-sentence often represents an entity that is hearer-old (cf. Abbott 1997).

indefinite phrase in (28) behaves like a predicative item, a fact which becomes more transparent if we consider the following paraphrase:

>> ‘In her life, which was **a** life *lived largely for the sake of others*, it was the one place that was her own.’

The rest of the examples follow the same logic:

(30)♥ The north-eastern region of Karamoja is the only arid region in **a country** rich in lakes and rivers, and suffers from a cyclical problem of drought and famine.

>> ‘the only arid region in this country, which is **a** country *rich in lakes and rivers*, [...]’

(31)♥ [...] we were going into the unknown, although South Australia had not been foreign to me for quite some time. **A** dreary **day** was slowly approaching the evening, and our voyage was uncertain with the waves beating mercilessly against the shore.

>> ‘The day, which was **a** *dreary* day, [...]’

(32)♥ After **a** strenuous **landing** and short consultation it was decided that we would be ferried to the island.

>> ‘After the landing, which was **a** *strenuous* landing, [...]’

As pointed out elsewhere in the paper, it is a common misconception that a restrictive modifier triggers the use of the definite article. Even when its function is defining in the proper sense of the word, the definite reference of the headword does not seem to be the consequence of this defining function but rather a necessary condition for it (cf. (8)). In examples (28–32), by contrast, the article reflects a special function of the modifier. The reference of the headword is definite, and only the highlighting function of the modifier can trigger the indefinite article. If the modifier is omitted, a definite determiner is the only choice:

(33)

a. In this life of hers, it was the one place that was her own.

b. The north-eastern region of Karamoja is the only arid region in this country, and suffers from a cyclical problem of drought and famine.

c. [...] we were going into the unknown, although South Australia had not been foreign to me for quite some time. The day was slowly approaching the evening, [...]

d. After the landing and short consultation it was decided that we would be ferried to the island.

It is, of course, possible to add a modifier to any of the headwords in (33) without changing the type of determiner. It should be noted, however, that the function of the modifier in such cases is solely descriptive, not highlighting. If it comes after the headword, it has to be enclosed in a pair of commas as a non-restrictive item:

(34)

- a. In this life of hers, lived largely for the sake of others, it was the one place that was her own.
- b. The north-eastern region of Karamoja is the only arid region in this country, rich in lakes and rivers, and suffers from a cyclical problem of drought and famine.
- c. [...] we were going into the unknown, although South Australia had not been foreign to me for quite some time. The dreary day was slowly approaching the evening, [...]
- d. After the strenuous landing and short consultation it was decided that we would be ferried to the island.

## 7. Some Other Tricky Words and Constructions

Last but not least, there are also some very simple, everyday words and constructions that may pose problems when it comes to article use. There is, for example, a general misconception that the adjectives *so-called*, *unique* and *most* (in the sense ‘very’) trigger the use of the definite article. I asked my 3<sup>rd</sup> year students once how they would justify the article underlined in the example below:

(35) For millenia the atoll known as Aldabra has bloomed in the absence of man. [...] In the mid-1960s Britain appeared to deliver the unique ecosystem’s death by [...]

To my great disappointment, almost half of the class claimed the reason was the adjective *unique*. It was only omitting the adjective or/and replacing the article with a demonstrative that convinced them of the opposite. *Unique* seems to be misleading for its meaning, *most* for its form, whereas associating *so-called* with the definite article could be due to the fact that this adjective is often found in definite noun phrases, which might create the wrong impression that *so-called* and the definite article are in a cause-result relationship. The following sentences should dispel the above misconception.

(36)

- a. This is a so-called protractor.
- b. The amphibian known as *proteus* is a unique creature.
- c. It was a most interesting evening.

Another fertile ground for mistakes is exclamatory sentences with *what* and *such*. It may be true that the pattern with countable, singular heads (e.g. *What a clever child!*) is a very frequent one, but this does not mean that the general pattern is ‘*what a / such a + noun*’. The general pattern is ‘*what/such + [noun phrase]*’, the use of the article depending solely on the headword of the noun phrase:

(37)

- a. What [a clever boy] he is! (countable, singular)
- b. What [( )/\*a clever children] they are! (countable, plural)
- c. What [( )/\*a terrible weather] we’re having! (non-countable)

A third problematic usage – the last to be mentioned in the paper, yet far from making the list of ‘tricky words and constructions’ complete – can be found with measurements, or more specifically, with the pattern ‘*a length/height/depth/weight/angle etc. of + amount*’. For example:

(38) The flute should be held at *an angle of 90°* to the axis of the head.

There might be a temptation to use the definite article in (38). What appears misleading is the fact that the angle size is universally and absolutely defined: be it called  $90^\circ$  or  $\pi/2$ , everybody knows exactly how wide the angle is. The misconception here is that  $90^\circ$  is in apposition to *angle* in the very same way as *London* is in apposition to *city* in *the city of London*. But while *London* is the name of a unique entity,  $90^\circ$  can name an infinite number of entities, which in fact represent instances of a type:

(39)

- a. We visited \*a [city of London] / \*[cities of London].
- b. The teacher drew an [angle of  $90^\circ$ ] using only a ruler and a pair of compasses.
- c. The teacher kept drawing [angles of  $90^\circ$ ] using only a ruler and a pair of compasses.

Compare:

(40)

- a. The teacher drew a [right angle] using only a ruler and a pair of compasses.
- b. The teacher kept drawing [right angles] using only a ruler and a pair of compasses.
- c. The flute should be held at [right angles] to the axis of the head.

It should be admitted, though, that the classifying function of the postmodifier is not always as obvious as in the above examples. To avoid even greater confusion, it is probably best to simply learn the pattern because ‘this is how it is’. A clear distinction, however, is to be drawn between this pattern and phrases in which the postmodifier designates the ‘possessor’ of the quality named by the headword:

(41)

- a. These fish can reach a length of over two metres. (<> What (kind of) length?)
- b. The length of these fish can be over two metres. (<> Whose length?)

## 8. Conclusion

The most frequently held misconceptions about article use seem to be the following: (i) the category of article is incompatible with the Saxon Genitive; (ii) an ordinal numeral is always preceded by the definite article; (iii) a restrictive modifier per se (especially a postmodifying of-phrase or a restrictive relative clause) triggers the use of the definite article. As shown in the paper, all the three erroneous beliefs can be ascribed to an insufficient understanding of grammatical rules. The terminology used is often interpreted incorrectly. The commonest mistake is equating

*defining* with *definite*, and *defining/restrictive* with *identifying*, which can lead to the false conclusion that the presence of a restrictive item yields a specific, definite interpretation. It is therefore absolutely vital to thoroughly understand these terms and the concepts they denote. It is also worth keeping in mind that article use is primarily a matter of pragmatics: the choice between the definite and indefinite articles reflects the speaker's decision to present a piece of information as hearer-old or hearer-new, depending on the hearer's knowledge and expectations.

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