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On the Use of Articles in English and in Hungarian

1. Introduction

The use of articles poses a real challenge for Hungarian learners of English as there are many differences between the two languages. As a result, learners make many mistakes in the proper use of articles. The primary aim of this paper is to explore the similarities and differences in how articles –, i.e., the definite, indefinite and zero article – are used in English and in Hungarian.

As generally defined in grammar books (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 265, 272, Huddleston and Pullum, 2002, pp. 368-373, Rácz 1991, p. 70, Keszler, 2000, p. 284), determiners serve to mark the noun phrase (NP) as definite or indefinite, but at the same time the basic ones characteristically express quantification. Articles are the basic means of expressing definiteness and indefiniteness with the definite article being the most basic indicator of definiteness and the indefinite article the most basic indicator of indefiniteness for singular count nouns. In other words, the NP with the definite article refers to something that can be identified uniquely in the contextual or general knowledge shared by speaker and hearer, whereas the reference of the NP used with the indefinite article is not uniquely identifiable in the shared knowledge of the speaker and hearer. Consider the following examples:

1 a) Bring me *the ladder*.

b) Bring me *a ladder*.

In 1a) the addressee can be assumed to be familiar with the referent of the definite NP, i.e., the ladder while in 1b) the addressee is not expected to be able to identify anything. One possible scenario for the use of *a* is that there are two or more ladders in their field of vision.

Similarly, in Hungarian the definite article marks the definiteness of the NP while the indefinite article indicates the indefiniteness of the NP (Rácz, 1991, p. 70, Keszler, 2000, p. 284). However, the distinction between the two articles is made partly on a semantic and partly on a grammatical basis. Consider the following examples:

2 a) Hozd *a létrát*.

b) Hozz *egy létrát*.

In 2a) the NP refers to a definite object and therefore the definite conjugation is used while in 2b) the NP refers to an indefinite object and therefore the indefinite conjugation is used.

In addition, there is a third form of article, the zero article in both languages, which indicates that the NP is used in a generic sense, i.e., it is generally characteristic of all the members of the given category (group, species, etc.) (Keszler, 2000, p. 285, Quirk et al., 1985, p. 274, Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 372). However, unlike in Hungarian, where the zero article can be used with a singular count noun in this generic function, the zero article in English is used with plural count nouns or the indefinite article with a singular count noun. Compare the examples below:

3 a) *Fiú nála jó jegyet nem kaphat.*

b) *A boy /Boys cannot get a good mark from him/her.*

2. The definite article the vs. a/az

As mentioned above, the definite article marks the NP as definite, and it is compatible with all types of common nouns: count singular, count plural and non-count both in English and Hungarian. The definite article in Hungarian has two forms, *a* and *az*, depending on whether the noun begins with a vowel (e.g. *a kandalló*) or a consonant (e.g. *az eresz*) (Keszler, 2000, p. 285):

4 a) Give me *the bottle/bottles/sugar*.

b) Add *ide az üveget, az üvegeket, a cukrot*.

In English the definite article has two phonetic forms. It is generally unstressed in connected speech. However, it has a stressed use, in the form of /ði:/, which is mainly found with proper names in examples like *Was it THE Bill Gates that he was talking about*, or with common nouns, as in *Is that THE book you're looking for?* (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002, p. 371).

The identifiability of the referent derives from a range of context (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002, pp. 368-371, Quirk et al., 1985, pp. 265-272, and Keszler, 2000, pp. 285-286).

The referent can be identified from the immediate situation, for example:

5 a) Wait for me at *the entrance*.

b) *Várj meg a kijáratnál.*

The definite article can serve as the means of identification, as in:

6 a) *The tenant* has arrived.

b) *Megjött a bérlő.*

Here the referent is known to the addressee, i.e., being known and identified appear together here.

The identity of the referent may be evident from knowledge of the 'larger' situation', i.e., the non-linguistic knowledge shared by speaker and addressee. Consider:

7 a) *The president* has been assassinated.

b) *Az elnököt* meggyilkolták.

The most likely interpretation is that the definite NP refers to the person they know as the president of the country.

The definite NP can have an anaphoric use as well where the referent is identifiable by virtue of its previous mention. We may distinguish two kinds of anaphora: direct (8a) or indirect (8b). In the former the same noun head has already occurred in the text whereas in the latter the reference becomes part of the hearer's knowledge indirectly, i.e. by inference from what has already been mentioned. For example:

8a) They have a cat and two dogs. The cat is fifteen years old. Van egy macskájuk és két kutyájuk. *A macska* 15 éves.

b) *My car* won't start; I think *the battery* is flat. *A kocsim* nem akar beindulni. Azt hiszem, *az akkumulátor* lemerült.

The identifiability can also derive from what follows the head noun, typically a postmodifier, rather than what precedes it, which is called the cataphoric use of the definite article, as in:

9 a) Nobody has seen *the child* who ran away from home.

b) Senki sem látta *a gyereket*, aki elszökött otthonról.

However, the cataphoric use of the definite article is limited to cases where the modification of the NP, e.g., a relative clause, restricts the reference of the noun, so that its referent is uniquely defined. A premodifier can also establish identifiability where the adjective in the superlative enables the referent to be identified:

10 a) Everybody wants to be *the most popular team*.

b) Mindenki *a legnépszerűbb csapat* akar lenni.

Here the team is singled out by its position at the top of the scale of popularity. As far as the function of the definite article expressing definiteness is concerned, there are many similarities between the two languages.

However, in English the definite article is also used with reference to body parts. For example:

11 a) He grabbed me by *the arm*. Megragadott *a karomnál*.

b) I looked him in *the eye*. *A szemébe* néztem.

In English the definite article is used instead of the possessive pronouns, *my* and *his* whereas in Hungarian the definite article is used with the possessive endings of the NP.

Unlike in English, the definite article in Hungarian occurs not just before possessive structures but also after demonstrative pronouns as illustrated by:

- 12 a) Jó ez a zene. *This music* is good.
 b) Látod azt a férfit? Do you see *that man*?

Another important difference between the use of articles in English and in Hungarian is that in Hungarian it is typically the definite article used in generalisations with plural count nouns and non-count concrete or abstract nouns while in English the zero article is used. Compare:

- 13 a) I like *birds*. Szeretem a *madarakat*.
 b) *Sugar* is sweet. A *cukor* édes.
 c) *Sleep* is necessary for *good health*. Az *alvás* szükséges a *jó egészséghez*.

It should be noted that the definite article in English is rather limited in its generic use. As pointed out by Quirk et al. (1985, p. 282), with singular heads, it is often formal or literary in tone, indicating the class as represented by its typical specimen:

- 14 a) No one knows precisely when *the wheel* was invented.
 b) Senki sem tudja pontosan, mikor találták fel a *kereket*.

Names of musical instruments and dances usually take the definite article in English, unlike in Hungarian, where a verb is used instead:

- 15 a) Mary plays *the harp* very well.
 b) Mary nagyon jól *hárfa*zik.

The English definite article *the* is sometimes used in reference to an institution of human society (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 269), as in:

- 16a) My sister goes to *the theatre* every month.
 b) A testvérem minden hónapban megy *színházba*.

Here *the theatre* refers to *the theatre* rather as an institution and not a particular theatre, i.e., it is used in a generic sense. There is a similar use of *the radio*, *the television* and *the paper(s)*, etc. referring to aspects of mass communication. In fact, here the definite article is used in Hungarian as well. Consider:

- 17 a) What's on *the radio/ on (the) TV/ in the papers* today?
 b) Mi van a *rádióban, a TV-ben/ az újságokban* ma?

3. The indefinite article a/an vs. egy

As stated above, the indefinite article *a* is the most basic indicator of indefiniteness for singular count nouns (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002, pp. 368-371, Quirk et al. 1985, pp. 265-272 and Keszler, 2000, pp. 285-286). For example:

- 18 a) I saw *a cat* at the gate.
 b) Láttam *egy macskát* a kapunál.

In this case the referent cannot be uniquely identified in the shared knowledge of the speaker and the hearer.

In fact, the indefinite article in English does not normally occur with noncount abstract nouns, except when the noun is premodified and/or postmodified and the NP refers to a quality or other abstraction which is attributed to a person while in Hungarian no article is used. (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 287):

19 a) Mavis had a *good education*.

b) Mavis *jó oktatásban* részesült.

It should be noted here that there are quite many nouns which are noncount nouns in English in contrast to Hungarian, where they are count ones, such as *information, advice, luggage, furniture, research* and *news*, etc. Consequently, they are not used with the indefinite article. Countability may be achieved by means of certain general partitive nouns, in particular *piece/bit/item* followed by an *of*-phrase, as in *an item of news, a piece of advice* and *a bit of research*. (Quirk et al., 1985, pp. 249-251).

Interestingly, unlike in Hungarian, both the indefinite article and the definite article are sometimes used with body parts in English. Nevertheless, it cannot be used unless the body has more than one of the body parts mentioned (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 273):

20) Sally has sprained *an ankle*.

He's broken *a leg*.

But not: *Roger has hurt *a nose*.

Furthermore, in English the indefinite article has a non-quantitative use as well, which is found in ascriptive predicative complements indicating simple set membership. (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002, p. 383). Consider the following example:

21 a) Jill is *a doctor*.

b) Jill *orvos*.

Here, what is being said is that Jill belongs to the set denoted by the noun *doctor*, i.e. she belongs to the set of doctors. In contrast, in Hungarian no article is used for categories, e.g., professions.

In English the indefinite article with singular count nouns can also have a generic use, as in:

22) *A tiger* can be dangerous.

Here, we are thinking of the class 'tiger' without specific reference to particular tigers. The generic use of *a* picks out any representative member of the class.

Moreover, in English the zero article with plural count nouns or the definite article with a singular count noun in a rather limited way can also be used in generic contexts:

23) *Tigers/ The tiger* can be dangerous.

However, generic *a/an* is restricted in that it cannot be used in attributing properties which belong to the class or species as a whole. Thus:

24) *The tiger is/Tigers* are becoming extinct.

But not: **A tiger* is becoming extinct.

In contrast, as was mentioned above, when speaking about members of a category in general, in Hungarian the definite article is used:

25) *A tigris* veszélyes lehet.

Here it designates that one member of a certain category, species, etc. is representative of all. The referent of the noun can be regarded as known based on our general knowledge about the world (Keszler, 2000, p. 286).

As pointed out by both Quirk et al. (1985, pp. 273-274) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002, p. 386) the indefinite article can also occur in a numerical or quantifying function in which it can be replaced by the numeral *one*:

26) The Wrights have two daughters and *a son*.

In fact, the indefinite article derives historically from the unstressed form of *one*. In some cases, the adjective *single* can add an intensifying force to the indefinite article or *one*, for example:

27a) They didn't stop for *a (single) day*.

b) Egyetlen *egy napra* sem álltak meg.

Interestingly enough, the Hungarian indefinite article *egy* derives from the indefinite pronoun (*egyik*) and the numeral *egy* (Keszler, 2000, p. 286).

One of the main roles of the indefinite article is to denote the rheme of the text, the unknown, new information. This is why it often occurs at the beginning of a text (Keszler, 2000, p. 286). Compare:

28 a) Volt egyszer *egy mackó*.

b) Once upon a time there was *a bear*.

The indefinite article is also often used in statements without denoting indefiniteness, for example, in evaluations and definitions, as illustrated by (Keszler 2000, p. 286):

29 a) Az élet *egy pillanat*.

b) Life is *a moment*.

4. The use of articles with proper nouns

As the use of articles with proper nouns displays great complexity, in this chapter I primarily intend to point out some of the differences which present difficulties for Hungarian learners of English. In fact, the errors produced by them result from mother tongue interference.

Having unique denotation, proper nouns do not generally share the formal characteristics of the common noun and are expected to lack number contrast,

determination and modification. However, sometimes they take on the characteristics of common nouns (Quirk et al., 1985, pp. 288-297).

If reclassified as common nouns, proper nouns can have their meaning varied by articles. Consider the following examples:

30 a) Nicsak, hisz ez a fiú *egy Petőfi*! Look this boy is *a Petőfi*. (= a poet like Petőfi)

b) I used to know *a Mary Roberts*. Ismertem *egy Mary Robertset*. (= a certain person called Mary Roberts)

c) *The Wilsons* are away this weekend. *Wilsonék* elmentek a hétvégére (= the family called Wilson). (In Hungarian the definite article is avoided here.)

Unlike in English, the use of the definite article with personal names, first names and surnames shows some variation in Hungarian. In general, no article is used with them (*Anna, Takács Anna*) as the personal name is unique, so it is not necessary to pick out one from several others. Nonetheless, it can sometimes be found in literary language, for example: *Itthon a Ferenc* (Rácz, 1991, p. 73). As noted by Nádasy (2001), when used in the spoken language, the definite article with personal names is rather colloquial, its use is not linked to social class, level of education; it just depends on whether we express ourselves in writing or speaking. It is commonly used in familiar written messages reflecting the spoken language (*Átmentem a Timihez, csók, Bea*). When a surname, such as *Kovács* is used with the definite article, a certain one of the many such names, for example, the boss is meant. In fact, the article with a surname indicates familiarity. We do not use a definite article with a full name or the name of a person we do not know personally. "Personal" acquaintance today is sometimes one-sided. It happens that we only know someone from TV, yet we consider them to be our direct acquaintances. *A Fábry*, for example, must be Sándor Fábry (<https://nyelvmuves.hu/stilus-retegek-divatok/nev-ele-nevelo>).

In my experience, the definite article is not used before personal names in the Eastern language area of Hungary, so it hurts the ears of those who come from the area to hear this feature in Budapest or in the media.

In contrast, when the definite article is used with a proper noun in English, it shows that it temporarily takes on features of common nouns and accepts a restrictive modification, (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 289). Consider the following examples:

31) *The Dr Brown* I know comes from Australia.

I spoke to *the* younger Mr Hamilton, not Mr Hamilton the manager.

It is worth pointing out that in the names of monarchs in English, an adjectival cognomen is placed after the proper noun and is prefaced by *the*, e.g., *Charles the Great, Ivan the Terrible*. It is similar to an appositive type of name, in which the by-name is nominal: *William the Conqueror, Richard the Lionheart* (Quirk et al.,

1985, p. 290). In Hungarian no article is used here: *Nagy Károly, Rettegett Iván, Hódító Vilmos, Oroszlánszívű Richárd*.

In titles of peerage, when followed by an *of* phrase, the definite article is used in English (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 292):

32 *The Duke of Wellington (Wellington hercege), The Countess of Derby (Derby grófnője)*

Geographical names, such as names of continents (*Europe; Európa*), countries (*England; Anglia*) and cities (*Rome, Róma*) normally have no articles either in English or Hungarian. However, there are exceptions such as (*The Netherlands* or *The Hague*), where in Hungarian no article is used: *Hollandia, Hága* (Quirk et al., 1985, pp. 293-297).

However, it is also true that some other types of proper nouns are often preceded by the definite article in both English and Hungarian (Quirk et al., 1985, pp. 293-297), as illustrated by:

33 a) Groups of islands (*The Bahamas; A Bahamák*)

b) Ranges of mountains (*The Alps; Az Alpok*)

c) Rivers (*The Danube; A Duna*)

d) Seas and oceans (*The Pacific Ocean; A Csendes-óceán*)

e) Canals (*The Suez Cana; A Szezezi-csatorna*)

f) Hotels and restaurants (*The Hilton (Hotel); A Hilton (szálló)*)

g) Theatres, opera houses (*The Globe (Theatre); A Globe (színház)*)

h) Museums, libraries (*The British Museum; A British Museum*)

i) Newspapers and periodicals (*The New York Times; A New York Times*)

However, there are many differences between the two languages in this respect. Some categories of geographical names normally have no article in English, unlike in Hungarian. For example:

34a) Names of lakes (*Lake Michigan; A Michigan-tó*)

b) Names of mountains (*Mount Everest; A Mount Everest*)

c) Locative names consisting of proper noun + common noun descriptor (*Buckingham Palace; A Buckingham Palota* or *Windsor Castle; A Windsori kastély*).

5. Conclusion

It can easily be concluded from this analysis that article usage is one of the hardest aspects of English grammar for Hungarian learners of English, and due to the influence of their mother tongue, they tend to commit many errors in using them. Although the two languages show many similarities in the use of articles, there are also some crucial differences. One major difference lies in the usage of the definite article for generalisation in Hungarian (e.g., *Szeretem az almát/a zenét/ a bort*; I

like *apples/music/wine*), which presents a real challenge to Hungarian learners of English as in English it is the zero article which has a generic use here. Similarly, when an NP functions as an ascriptive predicative complement indicating simple set membership such as in the case of professions, in English the indefinite article is used, e.g. *Jill is a doctor*; *Jill orvos*. Furthermore, some categories of geographical names such as *Lake Michigan*, *Mount Everest* and *Buckingham Palace* normally have no article in English, or a definite article is used, e.g., *The Netherlands*, *the Hague*, unlike in Hungarian. Finally, it is worth noting that in contrast to Hungarian, the definite article is not used with a first name in English, not even in a colloquialism such as in *a Kata* vs. *Kate*, except when it has a restrictive modifier taking on features of common nouns (*The Kate I know is a pretty girl.*).

I hope that this paper has contributed to a better understanding of what problems Hungarian students of English can face when learning how to use articles appropriately in English.

Irodalom

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On the use of articles in English and in Hungarian

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The English article system presents many problems for non-native speakers of English, thus to Hungarian learners of English as well, and due to the influence of the mother tongue they commit many errors in using them. While the definite article is the most basic indicator of definiteness, the indefinite article is the most basic indicator of indefiniteness for singular count nouns. However, there is a third type of article, the zero article, which indicates that the noun phrase is used in a generic sense in English whereas in Hungarian the definite article is used here. (e.g., *Milk is good for you. Cigarettes are bad for your health. Do you like folk music?* vs. *A tej jó neked. A cigaretta káros az egészségedre. Szereted a népzene?*). Although there are many similarities in the use of articles in English and Hungarian, there are also many crucial differences in this respect between the two languages as illustrated by the examples above. The main aim of this paper is to investigate these similarities and differences by primarily relying on descriptive grammar books commonly used by students during their studies at universities. Special focus will be placed on the use of articles for generalisation (e.g., *The bull terrier makes an excellent watchdog./A bull terrier makes an excellent watchdog./Bullterriers make excellent watchdogs.* vs. *A bullterrier kitűnő házőrző.*) and with proper nouns (e.g., *Westminster Abbey* vs. *A Westminster- apátság* or *Lake Balaton* vs. *A Balaton, Mont Blanc* vs. *A Mont Blanc*), as these are the most troublesome areas students face when studying the article system of English. I hope to be able to improve students' understanding of this difficult area and guide them to a more accurate usage of the English article system.

Keywords: *the definite article, the indefinite article, the zero article, common nouns, proper nouns, countability, generalisation*

Про використання артиклів в англійській та угорській мовах

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У статті зазначено, що система англійських артиклів створює багато проблем для носіїв англійської мови, а отже, і для угорців, які вивчають англійську мову. Через вплив рідної мови вони припускаються багатьох помилок у їх використанні. У той час як означений артикль є основним показником означеності, неозначений артикль – основним показником неозначеності для іменників в однині. Однак існує третій тип артикля – нульовий артикль, який вказує на те, що в англійській мові іменникове словосполучення вживається в загальному значенні, тоді як в угорській мові у такому випадку вживається визначений артикль. (наприклад, *Milk is good for you. Cigarettes are bad for your health. Do you like folk music?* vs. *A tej jó neked. A cigaretta káros az egészségedre. Szereted a népzene?*). Зроблено висновок, що незважаючи на те, що вживання артиклів в англійській та угорській мовах має багато спільних рис, між двома мовами у цьому плані існує також багато суттєвих відмінностей, як показано в наведених вище

прикладах. Основна мета цієї статті – дослідити ці подібності та відмінності, спираючись насамперед на підручники з описової граматики, якими зазвичай користуються студенти під час навчання в університетах. Особливу увагу приділено використанню артиклів для узагальнення (наприклад, *The bull terrier makes an excellent watchdog./A bull terrier makes an excellent watchdog./Bullterriers make excellent watchdogs. vs. A bullterrier kitűnő házórző.*) та з власними іменниками (наприклад, *Westмінстерське абатство vs. A Westмінster- апátság* або *Lake Balaton vs. A Balaton, Mont Blanc vs. A Mont Blanc*), оскільки це найбільш проблемні моменти, з якими стикаються студенти при вивченні артиклевої системи англійської мови. Сподіваємося, що напрацювання цієї публікації зможуть покращити розуміння студентами цієї складної сфери та направити їх на більш точне використання системи англійського артикля.

Ключові слова: *означений артикль, неозначений артикль, нульовий артикль, загальні іменники, власні іменники, конкретні іменники, узагальнення*

A névelők használatáról az angol és a magyar nyelvben

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Az angol névelő használata sok problémát okoz a nem anyanyelvi beszélőknek, így a magyar anyanyelvű tanulónak is, akik az anyanyelv hatása miatt sok hibát követnek el a használatuk során. Míg a határozott névelő a határozottság legalapvetőbb jelzője, addig a határozatlan névelő a határozatlanság legalapvetőbb jelzője az egyes számú főnevek esetében. Létezik azonban egy harmadik típusú névelő, a nulla névelő, amely az angolban a főnévi igenév általános értelemben való használatát jelzi, míg a magyarban itt a határozott névelőt használjuk (például *Milk is good for you. Cigarettes are bad for your health. Do you like folk music? Vs. A tej jó neked. A cigaretta káros az egészségedre. Szereted a népzene.*). Bár az angol és a magyar nyelvben sok hasonlóság van a névelők használatában, a két nyelv között e tekintetben sok lényeges különbség is van, amint azt a fenti példák is mutatják. A tanulmány fő célja, hogy ezeket a hasonlóságokat és különbségeket vizsgálja, elsősorban a diákok által az egyetemi tanulmányaik során általánosan használt leíró nyelvtankönyvekre támaszkodva. Különös hangsúlyt fektetünk az általánosításra szolgáló névelők használatára (például *The bull terrier makes an excellent watchdog./A bull terrier makes an excellent watchdog./Bullterriers make excellent watchdogs. vs. A bullterrier kitűnő házórző.*) and with proper nouns (e.g., *Westminster Abbey vs. A Westminster- apátság or Lake Balaton vs. A Balaton, Mont Blanc vs. A Mont Blanc vs. A Mont Blanc*) mivel ezek a legnehezebb területek, amelyekkel a diákok szembesülnek, amikor az angol nyelv névelőit próbálják elsajátítani. Az eredmények segíthetik a tanulókat a problémásabb nyelvtani szabályok begyakorlásában.

Kulcsszavak: *a határozott névelő, a határozatlan névelő, a nulla névelő, köznevek, tulajdonnevek, megszámlálható, általánosítás*