

## THE FORM AND THE FUNCTION THAT DEFINES AND ASSOCIATES DEFINITE AND INDEFINITE ARTICLES IN ENGLISH GRAMMAR

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### Abstract

Teachers expect that grammatical metadata is evidence-based, and not subject to inclusion of poetic license as is evident in Twain's 'The Prince and the Pauper' novel, in which two characters are found to be identical in form (being thitherto unrecognized identically shaped twins) as well as being alike in function (they both manage to pass as royal princes in-waiting). But it must be asked, could similar poetic license have inadvertently found its way into the grammatical treatment of Articles? This question must be asked because past grammars have not used an evidence-based approach to describing Articles. To address this shortcoming, and believing that an analytical re-measurement is not out of place, this paper is confidant in proposing a substantial treatment of articles, which is based on kindred form and kindred function and not poetic license. The methodology of this paper, which is to employ discerning exemplars of English sentences, emulates three recent publications, the first of which concerned altering word prominence in pursuit of grammatical convenience; while the remaining papers were concerned with ESL mastery of the verb complex; and lastly, the decoding of contractions. Given that some ESL learners have never required (nor acquired) Articles in order to attain first language competency (say, for example, Czech and some Baltic languages), this paper will serve to shed new light on the hidden-in-plain-sight operations of English, and could become a source document for today's ESL teachers on the treatment of Articles.

**Keywords:** ESL educational practice, ESL curriculum redevelopment, ESL teaching, Second language acquisition

### Introduction

Believing that a Transformationalist (Chomsky, 1965, 1957) view of grammar was poised to become an accepted successor to previous systems, such as Structuralism (Fries, 1952), as well as earlier Traditional grammars (Jespersen, 1948), Gunn & Eagleton (1966) defined articles as 'structural words' (p. 65), based on their



interpretation that such words have no lexical content but operate only to perform a grammatical function. To accept such a definition would be dangerous because it is a generalization that has not been shown to be true. Mitchell (1995, p. 39), to the contrary, notes that Old English used ‘one’ as the Indefinite article —as did Middle English (Cook, 1961)— which clearly indicates a lexical meaning of singular entity. Apart from spelling differences between those past times and now, the Indefinite article can be seen in Mitchell’s example of ‘a Wulf earth ascend’ (1995, p. 39), which he translates as ‘one wolf / a wolf was sent’. The example shows that an Indefinite article indeed has a lexical meaning of singularity, in the same manner as does a randomly chosen adjective, such as ‘red’. In short, Mitchell’s example contradicts the overly generalized conclusion given by Gunn & Eagleton (1966), and described above, that the Indefinite article cannot be seen to be operating in a lexical role.

An interesting twist to note here is that today’s Modern English has reduced the Indefinite article (‘an’) to its simplest usage (‘a’) in most usage, but that reduction is over-ruled and the original full article reappears with its nasal (n) attachment before a word that is deemed to begin with a vowel sound. Taking this twist, a step further, ‘one’ is maintained as an adjective not just in the numbering sequence but is used, for example, as a pronominal in an expression like ‘One never knows’. To be more specific, ‘one’ may well be described as a ‘demonstrative’ pronoun by function. While ‘one’ is not customarily categorized within the demonstrative grouping, a ‘demonstrative’ pronoun conclusion would be supported by Sapir (1921, p. 108).

Bollinger, as an adherent of the term morpheme, refers to articles as either ‘system morphemes’ or alternatively as ‘function words’ (1968, pp. 59-62). However, in spite of bringing no advance in clarity, he does make a contribution to the literature on articles by providing a description of the vocalic form of articles when outlining the three pronunciations of the Definite article, and the four pronunciations of the Indefinite article (pp. 59-62).

Although it might be an expectation that, over time, the literature would explain the roles and descriptions of articles in a more circumspect light by evincing clear definitions, the continued absence of such a step forward can only be lamented. As part of the arrival of ‘new approaches to grammar’ heralded by Gunn & Eagleton (1966, p. 119), a new piece of nomenclature for articles was added by Langackerian (1973), who preferred the term ‘Grammatical morpheme’ for articles. In spite of having a new term, it would be unwise to assume that there was a satisfactory



accompanying description, which could discriminate between morphemes that function grammatically and morphemes that carry lexical content.

Langackerian, in fact notes that such a distinction would be ‘correct up to a point, but it [the distinction] should not be pushed too far’ (p. 76). It might be asked whether ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers have been any better off for that supposed definition because it sheds scant knowledge, neither elucidating form nor function, as far as articles are concerned?

Based on reviewing the literature, this paper holds that previous English grammars have failed to identify a theme upon which comparisons can be made of Definite articles (Definite) when compared to Indefinite articles (Indefinites). Furthermore, this failure can be taken to

indicate misdirection in yesteryears’ grammatical classifications, perhaps towards past indulgence in poetic license rather than facts. Whatever the cause of misdirection, it is one that needs to be addressed adequately, and with some dispatch. The new discernments made in this paper’s revision of English articles should be congruous with assisting student learning autonomy, as espoused by Benson (2001), especially given that this fresh approach aims to link concepts together. Having made this claim, there is no intended criticism of the range and depth of help provided by some earlier explications. See, for example, the efforts of Christian (2002), Cohen (1998), Dorney (2001), Swick (2009), and Torres-Gouger (2019).

Therefore, this paper proposes as necessary an evidence-based analysis to be undertaken, following a suggested theme of congruence in the form and function of articles. If this paper demonstrates that degrees of congruence do exist, it could almost become inevitable that definitions for other parts of speech are similarly out-of-date, and may have been in that state for some time. While the amount of exposure that native speakers experience in their first language development always leads to mastery, the same proposition is not always true for ESL learners. Therein is a justification for reviewing briefly, the past history of article classification with an intention of correctly describing the form and function of articles in

English. There has been a tendency in current times (see, for example, Larsen-Freeman & Calce-Murcia (2016); Gas (2013); Saville-Troika (2012)), as well as in past times (typified by, say, Bollinger (1968)), to claim that Definite include just a single member (‘the’).

However, putting aside this historical blind spot, this paper proposes that Definite should include multiple members, all of whom display strong congruence of form. They are ‘the’, ‘this’, ‘that’, ‘these’, ‘those’, ‘their’ and ‘theirs’. The congruence in



form of these Definite is obvious in their spelling. They all begin with the same written digraph ('th'), which is voiced as a fricative consonant (O'Connor, 1973; Abercrombie, 1967). A second point to note is that the two plurals Definite ('these, those') are both pronounced with a sibilant final 's' sound, making evident their congruence of form to each other, and to one other member; namely, 'this'. This similarity is hidden by the spelling system, but is evident in an International Phonetic Alphabet spelling. For example, 'these' would be written in IPA as 'ðiz' which shows a voiced final sibilant. If there is a slightly less congruous form within Definite, it is 'the'. The latter form, in lacking a final letter, could perhaps indicate that it was the root from which the others evolved, in days of Old English development or earlier. Additionally, it could be seen as perhaps a harbinger of difference in function.

### **Methodology**

This paper's approach to locating and describing English articles is done through an organized presentation, and discussion, of exemplar sentences, each of which demonstrates the nature of English articles. Presentations are organized into sections which deal firstly with

the form and function of Definite and Indefinites, and concluding with a short treatment that discusses cases of the juxta positioning usage of Definite and Indefinites. This order in first presenting Definite has been chosen for the reason that it is an accepted norm in pedagogy to begin with what is termed as a 'known' (whether this be a Definite experience, or topic) and move towards an 'unknown' (therefore less Definite) topic or experience.

This paper's approach of analytical re-measurement is not out of place, because it emulates the approach taken in recently published papers, these being the innovative focus-promotion premise which concerned altering word prominence in pursuit of grammatical convenience (Bryant, 2019a); in focusing on verb structure mastery for ESL speakers (Bryant, 2019b); and, in focusing on decoding contractions, again for ESL speakers (Bryant, 2019c). The said publications have shed new light on the hidden-in-plain-sight features and operations of English, and hopefully this paper will serve to inform ESL teachers, similarly. This paper may also function as a helpful foil to publications which aim to provide detailed lists of common pitfalls in English (see, for example, Karjalainen (2012)).



## Findings

The following sections comprise of a number of exemplar samples, whose purpose is to demonstrate the form and function of English Definite. Among other things, the findings below should impress upon readers the non-truth of Articles being simple; subtle, yes but simple, no.

### The Form of Definite

There are six Definite articles, but seven if the count includes the inflected form 'theirs'. Their close familiarity of form is shown in the exemplar below. This (ðɪs) book; these (ðiːz) letters; those people; that koala; the bushfires; their game; it's theirs.

The exemplars are similar in form in that they all begin with a dental fricative consonant 'th'(O'Connor, p. 61), which is then followed by a vowel, although the vowel does vary in form.

Speaking in terms of English spelling conventions, three articles end in a sibilant alveolar fricative consonant 's' ('this, these, those, theirs'); one ends in a alveolar stop consonant 't' ('that'); one ends in 'r' ('their'); and one ('the') has no final consonant, perhaps because it

was once the original model that was likely extended by inflection. To some extent, English spelling conventions obscure this similarity in form and to hint at this situation, the IPA form has been shown, for the first two exemplars. Although voiced (and its curiously named co-term voiceless) are not mentioned above, the IPA 'z' is equivalent to 's' except that it has a greater degree of force in its voicing, being thus described as voiced.

### The Functioning of Definite

A majority ('this, that, these, those, their, theirs') of Definite may best be described as serving in one or more grammatical capacities; while the remaining Definite ('the') may be described as serving in one or more discourse capacities, and examples are given below.

### Grammatical Definite Exemplars

Grammatical Definite serve to indicate number (singularity, or plurality) as well as distance (Close, or more distant), which is actual or perceived, and finally 'ownership'.





This key shouldn't be here. You will need these keys. That teacher is exceptional, but those teachers have continually succeeded in educating ghetto students. Their teammates are excellent, but when it comes to opposition sides, theirs are formidable.

### **Limitation**

This paper provided a modest set of exemplars, in the belief that most readers would have sufficient fluency in English to generalize the provided exemplars to reflect other circumstances, correctly.

### **Conclusion**

In respect of grammatical metadata on articles, this paper questioned whether past literature has been evidence-based, or has succumbed to poetic license as is found in Twain's 'The Prince and the Pauper' novel, in which two characters are found to be identical in form (Identical twins) as well as alike in function (both passing as royal princes in-waiting). A perusal of the literature found scant evidence-based treatment of articles, notwithstanding whether that treatment was in examples or in grammatical definitions. Introducing a theme of comparisons based on analyses of form and function as guidelines, and approaching the task using a methodology which presented exemplar sentences that demonstrate English usage, it was possible for this paper to provide a framework to discuss and appreciate English articles, both Definite and Indefinites, thereby leaving behind poetic license and preconceived notions. This paper's approach of analytical re-measurement is not out of place, because it emulates the approach taken in recently published papers, which treated the innovative focus-promotion premise as it detailed the process of altering word prominence in pursuit of grammatical convenience; and also, in a second paper which describes verb structures to assist ESL speaker mastery; and, in a third paper that focused on decoding contractions, which are semaphores that need to be interpreted by ESL speakers. The said publications have shed new light on the hidden-in-plain-sight features and operations of English, and hopefully this paper will serve to inform ESL teachers, similarly. Given that some ESL learners have never required articles in order to attain first language competency (say, for example as a starting point, Czech; but not forgetting that other ESL learners may have struggled with incorporating article usage into their idiolect), it is hoped that current ESL teachers may now be more confident in their students' success, based on this paper's grammatical refinement of articles.



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